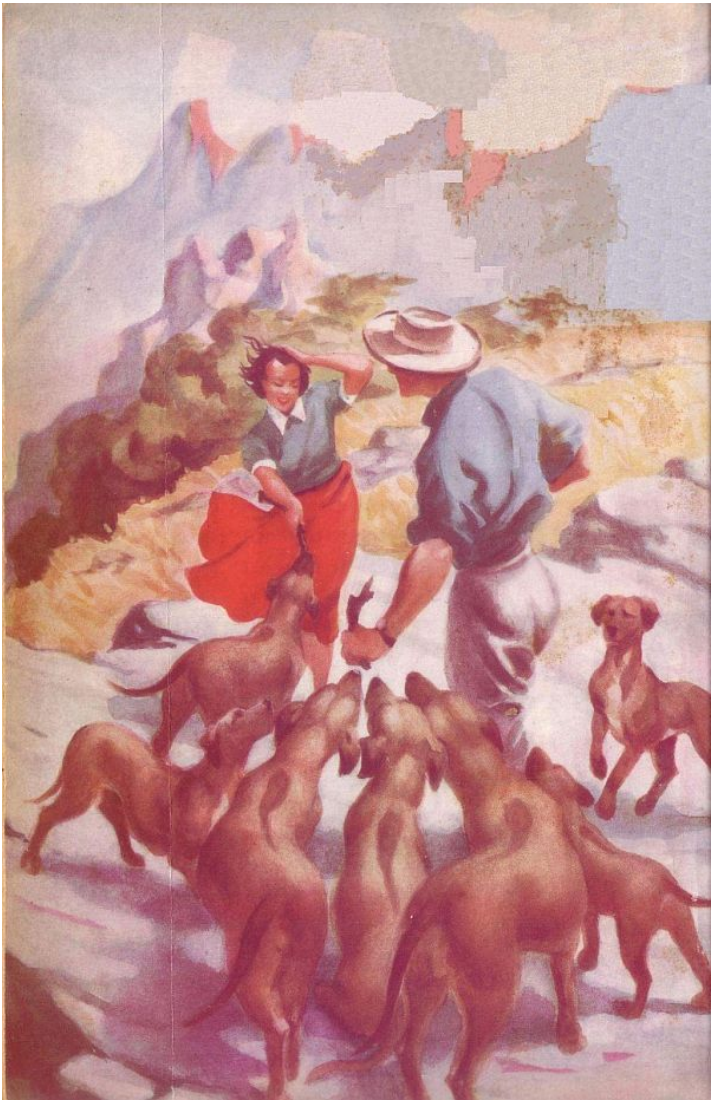



THERE'S A SECRET HID AWAY
Memories of unusual experiences and mysteries in Southern Africa and African isles; strange tales and legends and unrecorded adventures; and people who crossed the author's path and left him wondering.
BY LAWRENCE G. GREEN
HOWARD TIMMINS
CAPE TOWN

Some of the roofs are plum-colour,
Some of the roofs are grey,
Some of the roofs are silverstone,
And some are made of clay;
But under every gabled close
There's a secret hid away.
Lilian DUFF

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Tunny is common enough to become monotonous

Jamestown is especially aware of its cliffs.

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Just above Knollcombes is the Baptist chapel and the graveyard where the Boer prisoners were buried.



Chapter 1
SECRET OF LIFE

O mickle is the Powerful grace that lies
In herbs, plants, stones, and their true qualities:
For nought so vile that on the earth doth live
But to the earth some special good doth give
Shakespeare

ONE HUNDRED and sixteen degrees that day, ninety-five by night. Clanwilliam in midsummer a quarter of a century ago. I sat on the hotel stoep in good company, ready for any diversion which might ease the burden of the heat.

Down the main street in the moonlight came skipping and dancing a tall and powerful man with long hair and flowing beard. He wore an army greatcoat and a sheepskin cap. A coloured boy, carrying an old-fashioned candle-lamp, followed the queer stranger. The bearded man, seeing that he had found an audience, halted before the stoep, and put down the skin bag he carried. Now we could see the benevolent eyes of the man. Odd he might be, but he would harm no one.

"I am Pieter Boom, and I am six thousand years old," he announced in English with an Afrikaans accent. "I have travelled the whole world, and now I have come to Clanwilliam to read the Bible to you. Boy – hold up the lamp."

For a while the crowd on the stoep listened politely, though it was clear that

they wished to know more about the man himself. During a pause someone called out: “Take off that overcoat, man – you’ll suffocate in this weather.”

“Heat and cold I do not feel,” replied the preacher. He went on to talk of herbs and he laid down rules of health. His audience listened intently, and I only wish that I had noted more details of his strange lecture. The late Dr. Peter Nortier was there, the beloved physician and farmer who did so much for the district. “Is that right, doctor?” inquired the crowd as the preacher uttered his words of warning. “Perfectly true ... excellent advice,” confirmed the doctor. At the end of the address, I remember, the preacher urged us to eat more lentils, which he regarded as one of the most nourishing foods on earth. “Absolutely right,” confirmed Dr. Nortier.

When it was over someone invited the preacher into the bar. Gently he refused the invitation. Then someone else offered to buy him a bag of lentils. This he accepted. I recall the hotel-keeper opening up his store and everyone flocking in to see the lentils weighed and handed over.

Afterwards I joined the crowd in the bar while the delighted preacher capered off into the darkness with his little attendant and his favourite diet. For years I carried a vision of the man, wondering how he lived, how much he really knew. But I never expected to hear of him again.

Now that I have all the time in the world I am picking up old threads. Sometimes I discover the truth about unusual experiences and odd characters who passed by during busier years and left me wondering. Memories of strange encounters and forgotten dramas, unexplained mysteries and elusive rarities, have been filling my mind. I must find the missing episodes if I can, and bring the past to life, though I am fully aware of riddles which I shall never solve.

Yet by inspiration or luck I am filling the gaps in some of the little dramas that came my way long ago. I still find pleasure, too, in preserving those unwritten narratives which are on the point of being lost through the passing of old people, the only people who can still speak as eye-witnesses of unusual events.

I was in Clanwilliam again recently, and I sought out one who was there on the night of that memorable lecture. “What happened to the preacher?” I asked, fully expecting a shrug of the shoulders.

“Pieter Boom ... he’s still here, somewhere in the mountains,” came the reply. “Must be seventy now if he’s a day ... but perfectly healthy and enjoying his lentils when he can get them.” And so, after twenty-five years, I heard the story of Pieter Boom, whose real name is Pieter Burger.

They nicknamed him Boom because his whiskers grew like a tree. He could discuss so many subjects that some said he was a university man; but this he denied. He had joined the police towards the end of World War I, and had become heavy-weight boxing champion of the Western Province. During one fight in 1920, however, he received such a hammering that he was invalided out of the force and awarded a pension of thirteen pounds a month. He then turned to religion, and took to the road as a preacher.

It was coincidence that I should have watched the arrival of Pieter Burger in the district where, with the years, he had become a legendary figure. All those years, while I was travelling up and down Africa, half way across the world, Pieter Boom was living in the Cedarberg mountains. While I crouched in the caves of Tobruk thinking about the next bomb explosion, this old child of nature was sleeping deeply in the caves where those earlier lovers of freedom, the Bushmen,

had left their rock paintings. I suppose there is no corner of South Africa where a hermit would find greater solitude amid scenes of grandeur than in this mountain world of hundreds of square miles. Here lone Pieter had ground, and roasted the wild almonds for his coffee, picked and brewed his own rooibos tea, collected herbs and wild fruits and caught hares in distant kloofs seldom trodden by human feet. He bathed in mountain streams, and cooked his food with the aroma of the cedar wood fire in his nostrils. Sometimes he came down into the settled valley, fragrant with orange groves. Most of the years he spent on the remote heights. “I have not a worry in the world, but I cannot sleep with a roof over my head,” he told the village people.

When his military overcoat fell to pieces, Pieter Burger trapped dassies and made himself a Robinson Crusoe garment from the skins. I think he could survive without his pension, for he makes his own shoes, lives off the country and pays no rent. He can still run for miles, leaping wire fences in his path. He knows the baboons and the buck, and he has a way with dogs which is almost uncanny. Never has a dog bitten him. He says that he is sorry for people who live in civilisation. I can believe it.

The man who told me about Pieter Burger reminded me that Clanwilliam had been the home for some years of one of the cleverest herbalists in South Africa. It was in the early nineteen-thirties that Jan Agenbach arrived in the district as foreman of a gang working on the Olifants River irrigation scheme. Agenbach was full of personality, with piercing light blue eyes and tawny hair. In the Cedarberg mountains he found a wealth of herbs, and he treated the ailments of his men so effectively that people from Clanwilliam began consulting him.

Agenbach married and settled in Clanwilliam when the dam was finished.

Stories of his cures spread far beyond the district, and people drove long distances to see him. Often, before they could describe their symptoms, Agenbach told them what they were suffering from. It may have been nothing more than keen observation, of course, but his reputation grew with the years.

Agenbach never revealed his secrets. He used vaseline as a base for many of his herbal ointments, and he mixed a number of herbal medicines which were regarded by his patients as elixirs. Born with a caul, he wore it always under his hat. Superstitious people regard a caul as lucky, of course, and Agenbach declared this his success was due to it.

There are as many tales of Agenbach as a *siener* or clairvoyant as there are of his herbal knowledge. Sometimes he told people what they had been talking about as they approached his house. He could locate straying cattle, describing places he had never seen. Agenbach died of pneumonia in the winter of 1937, and his widow died soon afterwards. They left a daughter, but Agenbach's wisdom has gone unrecorded.

Another man of the mountains crosses my screen of memory. He is bearded like Pieter Burger. Once the huge mass was flaming red, but now it is grey. I met him when I was a schoolboy, and forty years passed before I was able to look a little way into his mind.

After four decades everyone in Cape Town knows this man by sight. He is Joe Masurek[1], the Russian herbalist, who likes you to call him "Professor". I remember him as I first saw him; the long, vivid hair, seaman's peaked cap, thick overcoat and seaboots, a sack, a cudgel and a pipe.

[1] Not to be confused with "Russian" Smith, the old sailor who lived for years under a wharf at Table Bay Docks and died during World War II.

His clothes and his blue eyes remain unchanged, but now he is over eighty and at times he is bent under the weight of his years. I find the signs of age doubly pathetic in such a man, for he is a child of nature, he belongs to the open air and he must feel the loss of his powers far more than those who have never really made use of all that Nature gave him.

Joe Masurek told me that he was born in White Russia. As a young man he walked all over Europe learning the lore of the herbalist, knowledge that goes back to the Cave Man. He came to understand the properties of homely plants, the roots and leaves of ancient repute which did indeed heal suffering mankind. Sometimes by smell, sometimes by sharp eyesight, he picked such powerful medicinal herbs as the buttercup called Monkshood, which many feared because of the aconite poison it contained. Joe knew how to prepare a safe ointment from it for neuralgia. He gathered Belladonna and Foxglove, too, and the narcotic with yellow flowers called Henbane. In the woods he found the sorrel which makes a poultice for ulcers. The evergreen Broom he used as a purgative, while he cured many a case of indigestion with Caraway seeds or Angelica roots.

Then he went to sea before the mast, and shortly before World War I his ship called at a South African port. Joe Masurek sauntered off on a walk in the veld, and he was so interested in what he saw that he let his ship go without him. That was before the days of passports. Nobody bothered about a middle-aged Russian herbalist wandering through the Cape districts on foot. Joe Masurek was fascinated by herbs he had never seen before.

I put it to Joe that it must have taken him a long time to discover the medicinal properties of South African herbs, and the places where valuable herbs could be found. He shook his great mane of hair.

“Just watch the animals,” advised Joe in his cultured voice. “Use your nose and watch the animals. Buck, horses and baboons all point the way to the herbs. In the great influenza epidemic I saw the baboons scratching up wild garlic for themselves, and that is the finest influenza medicine you could hope to find anywhere.”

So the Russian roamed the Cape mountains and the veld, using the principles which herbalists have built up since the beginning. Often he carried out experiments on himself, identifying emetic and purgative shrubs unknown in Europe, blistering his arm with euphorbia milk, bathing his eyes with the lantana herb called “bird’s brandy”, drinking the syrup of the sugar-bush which so many take for chest ailments.

He found that the bitter-tasting, pungent or aromatic herbs were often the most effective. By taste and smell, trial and error, he gained the knowledge that many a university botanist might envy. He came to believe in fresh, local herbs for the treatment of local diseases. If the *koekmakranka* was not to be found in a district, he would treat stomach sufferers with the thistly, greygreen *karmedik* plant, or the little bush called *bels* which grows on the heights, or the *kapokbossie* of the Karoo. The gum from cedar trees made a hot poultice for rheumatics, and when this was not available he applied warmed leaves of the arum lily. *Hotnotskooigoed,* the shrub with silver leaves which mountaineers and vagrants use as bedding, was among the remedies he learned to apply for heart complaints; *kattekruie* (catmint) and thyme were others. He saw the Hottentots gathering the roots of the purple flowered pelargonium, boiling them with milk to cure dysentery. But the Malays picked the pelargonium with crimson flowers, known as *Roode Rabassam,* to help a woman in labour.

Often enough Joe Masurek encountered *bossiedokters* who tried to mislead him and preserve their secrets. In the end the shrewd eyes of the Russian penetrated all deceit. He went on his way, learning the value of the pointed leaves of "Bushman's tea" for asthma, the resinous roots of the *platdoring* or *sieketroos* as a diuretic, the juice of wild fig leaves as a gargle, a narcotic and as a lotion for burns.

You cannot acquire this herbal pharmacopoeia without visiting wild and lonely places. Joe Masurek has never feared any animal, however, and like Pieter Burger he has a special power over ferocious dogs. Leopards have crossed his path in the mountains, but never have they attacked him. The only time he had to run for his life was when he encountered a pack of baboons which had been trapped in a mountain fire and had become mad with fear. But he has kept a sharp look-out for snakes ever since a yellow cobra bit him. He says that he needed his herbal remedies that day, though I believe it was his own magnificent physique which saved his life. There was also a poisonous spider which inflicted a dangerous bite, but he soon recovered. Once he broke a leg while climbing. Otherwise he knew no real illness for eighty years.

It was in 1915 that Joe Masorek reached Cape Town, and very soon he realised that Table Mountain would provide him with all the essential herbs. Besides dealing in medicinal plants he knows where to find the most appetising watercress; and after the first autumn rains he can locate the field mushrooms which are in such great demand at restaurants. I do not know whether mushrooms have a medicinal value, but they form part of Joe Masurek's stock-in-trade as a remedy for certain bacterial infections.

I found that the "Professor" knew all about the "doctrine of signatures", though he laughed at the ancient idea that you could tell the medicinal value of a herb

from its shape. Sometimes the ancients were right. There are tubers on the roots of the pilewort which suggested it as a remedy for piles; and so a useful ointment was made when blended with hog's lard. And the Cape gooseberry is the traditional cure for stone in the bladder or kidneys; an infusion of the leaves and a decoction of the seeds taken many times a day.

You enter a fascinating world of healing indeed when you consider the medicines of the veld and the mountains and the farms,

Boiled strawberry leaves to remove tartar from the teeth. Orange leaves and flowers for all convulsive ailments, peach leaves as a sedative. Sorrel for the liver, wild thyme to cure melancholy and nervous diseases. Leaves and flowers of certain heaths as a tonic. Fern syrups to relieve hoarseness. Mosses for dressing wounds, pine tar for skin diseases, acanthus as a poultice for ulcers. Flowers and leaves of daisies to relieve pain when other remedies have failed. A decoction of nettles as a gargle, olive leaves for reducing a fever, clover for whooping cough, and cabbage juice for stomach ulcers.

As a collector of botanical specimens, the "Professor" ranks indeed with the professionals. He kept his private collection in a room which he hired in the city; and it is sad to relate that someone robbed him of this hoarded treasure of the years.

Few men can have slept more often than Joe on the heights and in the caves of Table Mountain. This, I think, explains the heavy overcoat in midsummer. Joe carries his bedding on his back. But he is completely unaware of clothes as he is oblivious to social distinctions. Joe Masurek dines with friends in fashionable suburbs, and he has been observed taking a hand in a card game with the natives on duty in an all-night garage. When he is in

town he goes regularly to a favourite milk-bar for a cheese sandwich.

Joe Masurek was feeling the weight of his years late in 1955, and he was taken to hospital after a heart attack in the street. They tried to cut off his beard and long hair, but Joe resisted all efforts. He told his visitors that he knew the herbs he needed for his ailment, but he was too weak to climb in search of them. When he looked through the window at friendly, distant Table Mountain, tears came into the old man's eyes. The mountain had done more than provide him with a living, and he loved the kloofs and the ledges, the waterfalls and forests.

So there were two men who gave me little glimpses into their lives under the sun and stars, and into the philosophy ruling their lives. Ambitious people, those who strive for success, people too deep in the ruts of city life to gaze up at the sky, will find nothing admirable in two old vagrants. Not many of us would survive so close to Nature in the mountains; not many would even wish to try. But we are not all cast in the same mould. Pieter Burger and Joe Masurek found the way of life suited to their peculiar needs. There is room in our civilisation for picturesque vagrants as well as successful business men. And it is certain that Pieter Burger and Joe Masurek have learnt more about life close to Nature than some of the greatest brains of the cities.

Have these old vagabonds any secrets worth knowing? I think some of them have. Man cannot live in solitude year after year without storing up wisdom which is not to be found in books. In the herbs of the veld there rests the basis, the origin of modern medical science. Many herbs are useless, some are dangerous, others have saved lives. With all their marvellous drugs, the trained healers are still working on the fringe of a great field. The cure for cancer may be growing

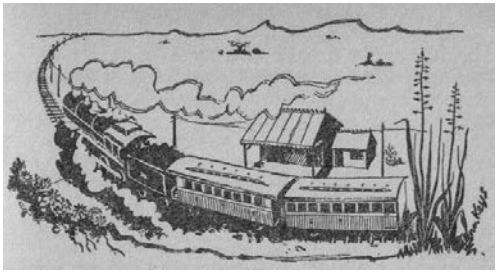
unrecognised under a rock on a mountain top.

In the Cape there are vast stores of herbs and a rich treasure house of inherited knowledge. No doubt some of the old secrets have been lost, surviving only in legend. I am thinking especially of the mixture of plant juices, so powerful in the hands of long departed Hottentot herbalists that a man's limbs could be cut off without pain.

Of course the real art of the herbalist lies in plucking herbs at the right time and using them in the right form. Orthodox medicine does not deny the value of herbs, but doctors claim that their synthetic laboratory products are cleaner, cheaper and more effective. I wonder whether the herbs have been tested fairly? A dried and wizened specimen cannot have the virtue of the same herb used soon after it has been gathered, and at a season when it is at full strength. Dried digitalis, for example, is useless. But what is the right season – before flowering, or when the flower appears, or at seeding time? The answer must vary from plant to plant. It is also essential to use the right part at the right time; sometimes the whole plant, often only the flower or the seed. There are poisonous growths with safe parts, like the *gifhoutbossie;* you can grate the roots and use them to cure stomach-ache. (I believe this was a favourite medicine of the old Koranna *kaptein* Hendrik Beukes, whose widow revealed the secret.) Some herbs are more powerful when mixed with other herbs and substances; linseed oil, *santolienhout,* buchu, honey and *wildedagga* for inflammation of the lungs. And the herbalist must acquire his difficult art without the aid of text books.

Yet I believe that men like Pieter Burger and Joe Masurek come very close to the secret of health, the secret of life. Many of the great discoveries in medicine were made by primitive herbalists. Raw savages provided the civilised world with

quinine and digitalis. I hope that when still greater discoveries are made, the bearded old vagabond of a herbalist will not carry his secrets with him to the grave.



Chapter 2
THE OLDEST MAN ON EARTH

MOST of us, I suppose, have passed some of our time pondering over the secret of long life. I have questioned many old people, a few of them genuine centenarians; and as a rule I have found them alert and intelligent, qualities which may have some bearing on the problem.

The oldest man of all I met by chance. He may have been the oldest man in Africa, possibly on earth. I was travelling to Northern Rhodesia in 1935 and the train stopped at one of those desert stations in Bechuanaland where you see a water tank, a name-board and a fence adorned with karosses which passengers sometimes buy. This station also offered the spectacle of a white haired, white-bearded ancient who was obviously blind and appeared to be happy in spite of his closed, sightless eyes.

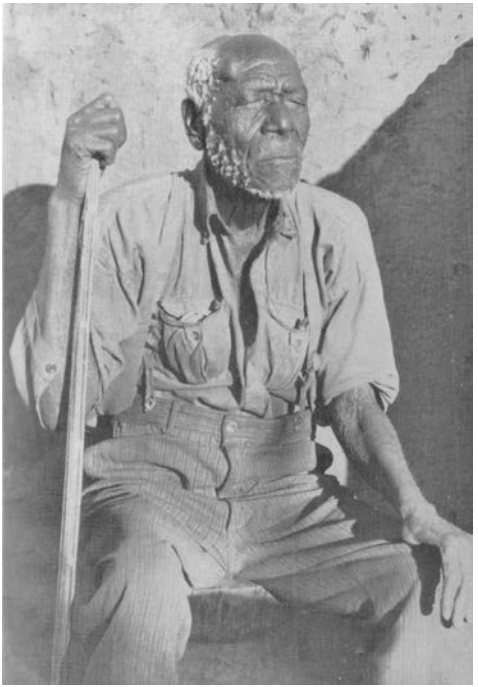
"That is Ramonotwane, the oldest man you'll ever set eyes on," remarked a picturesque white man in a bush shirt and riding breeches. I think he was a trader who had come to the station to collect his goods and live for five minutes in the semblance of a wider world. He had a humorous face, and he made me wish the train was staying longer.

"How old?" I asked suspiciously, though I smiled at his remark.

"Some say a hundred and twenty years old," replied the white man. "Longer than I'll last, anyway – the brandy will get me before that." But he did not look like it. A little desert-weary, perhaps, or "sand-happy" as we once called it.

Deserts are healthy places, and Ramonotwane lasted for another decade after my glimpse of him. I always regretted that there was no interpreter present, and that the train pulled out before I could get to know the old man. As it was, I simply carried away an impression of one who had warmed himself in the South African sun, and found pleasure in it, during a lifetime beyond the average.

He was a large-headed man but not very tall, and in that I found him true to the longevity type. Your lean fellow, below six feet, lively as a grig, is much more likely to become a centenarian than your heavy giant. I also remembered that Ramonotwane had most of his own teeth. Very old people will tell you that they owe their lives to teeth which, even when worn down, are still capable of dealing with all sorts of food, and that the finest dental plates are poor substitutes.



The oldest man I ever met by chance. He may have been the oldest man in Africa, possibly on earth.

Reports of native centenarians are treated with great reserve by scientists in South Africa, though the lay public balances this attitude by not being critical enough. I did not attach any importance to the white mans' estimate of one hundred and twenty years. To my surprise, however, Ramonotwane came into the news that year, and it seemed that he might be the oldest man in Africa after all.

Certainly he had waited a long time for this fame. His own people had recognized him for many years as a venerable and lovable old man, a wise man with a sense of humour. Missionaries and officials, too, were fully aware of Ramonotwane, and had come to regard him as an authority on phases of Bechuanaland history. But to the outside world, this story of the man who had lived for one hundred and twenty years was a strange tale indeed, and one which aroused wide interest.

How do you fix the age of a native without a birth-certificate? You must be an historian, full of tribal lore and the dates of those events which are likely to be remembered by natives. Wars and battles, the births and deaths of great chiefs, the founding of towns, comets and plagues, sensational floods and falls of snow, drought and blizzards and earthquakes; all these remain in the mind of a native as the landmarks of a century. When the census enumerators carried out their task in 1951 they were equipped with a list of South African dates starting with the death of Chaka (1828) and including such incidents as the establishment of Lovedale (1842), the cattle killing delusion (1857), Adam Kok's trek (1862), the first appearance of the mealie-grub (1865) and the blowing up of the Kokstad powder magazine (1878).

If a man said he was born in the year of the great famine last century, the list fixed him as an 1885 baby. Many old natives remembered Queen Victoria's Jubilee

(1887), Sir Henry Loch's visit to the native territories (1891) and the locusts that came the following year. Among the events of this century fixed in the minds of many thousands of natives were the crop disease Of 1904, Halley's comet (1909), the first census of all races in the Union (1911), the sinking of the troopship Mendi in 1917 with heavy casualties among the members of the native labour corps on board.

The man who brought Ramonotwane to light was an investigator of considerable skill – Mr. F. R. Paver,[2] editor of the Johannesburg "Star". In 1933 Mr. Paver found Ramonotwane living in the village of Kalamare, among the Shoshong hills twenty miles to the east of the railway line. With Mr. Paver was Lt.-Col. Jules Ellenberger, C.M.G., former Resident Commissioner of the Bechuanaland Protectorate, a fluent native linguist with thirty-seven year's experience of the country.

Ramonotwane stated that he had known Sechele, a Bakwena chief mentioned by Livingstone. "I was born a few years after Sechele," declared Ramonotwane. This gave the first clue to Ramonotwane's age. Sechele was a Bechuanaland celebrity who lived in a well-built house with mirrors, clocks, a silver tea-pot and other amenities. The hunter Selous described him as the most completely civilised native he had ever met. Sechele was born in 1811.

Ramonotwane also said that he was a small boy herding goats when Makaba was killed. Now the missionary Moffat visited Makaba, chief of the Bangwaketse, in 1825; but when Andrew Geddes Bain,

[2] Mr. Paver is an authority on Voortrekker, Zulu and Bechuana history. He is the last man in the world to be impressed by a charlatan. I have had the benefit of his expert help in writing this chapter.

explorer and trader, entered the territory in 1826 he was shown the place where Makaba had been killed by fugitive Matatis.

Bechuana lads joined their *maphato* (regiment) between the ages of fourteen and seventeen. Ramonotwane gave an account of his exploits as a fighting man up to the time of his capture when the Matabele warriors under Msilikazi invaded Bechuanaland. That was in or about 1832.

Perhaps you will remember that Msilikazi (spelt Moselekatse when I was at school) was the Zulu induna who failed to send back all the loot to his king Chaka after a battle. Chaka hurled a large army against him, but Msilikazi escaped into the territory now known as the Transvaal. There he and his followers became known as the Matabele; ten thousand cruel invaders who killed for the love of killing. They spared the young girls, and sometimes a likely young man such as Ramonotwane was allowed to join them. Ramonotwane often chanted an *isibongo* in praise of his old leader Msilikazi, using the Zulu dialect of the Matabele. He told of the journey northwards into the land which is now Rhodesia, and the conquest of the Mashona tribes. Msilikazi trusted Ramonotwane, appointing him as one of the guardians of the chief's harem.

Once in his life Ramonotwane took part in an attack on some white men. "I was charging with my shield raised, when suddenly I found my left hand powerless," Ramonotwane narrated, "I looked, and *wau!* thumb and finger gone."

Mr. Paver had no difficulty in fixing the date of this episode, for it occurred in the Matopo Hills at a period when the only white men in the country were a party of Voortrekkers under Hendrik Potgieter. These men crossed the Limpopo in 1847, returning to the Transvaal soon after beating off Msilikazi's warriors. Msilikazi

died in 1869,[3] but towards the end of his career he rewarded Ramonotwane for his services by sending him back to his own people.

With this and other evidence Mr. Paver checked Ramonotwane's story at every point and found that it rang true. Ramonotwane must have been born in or about 1815, the year of Waterloo.

Naturally, there were sceptics. The story of Ramonotwane reached London in 1938 and "The Times" published a portrait, of Ramonotwane and opened its columns to a most interesting controversy. The late Sir John Harris, pillar of the Anti-Slavery and Aborigines Protection Society, had been visiting Bechuanaland earlier that year, and had spent some time looking into Ramonotwane's age. He said that chiefs and missionaries, officials and friends of the old man had informed him that Ramonotwane had been born in the same year as Sekgoma, father of Khama. Harris thought that Ramonotwane might be one hundred and forty years of age, and suggested that some qualified scientist in South Africa should visit Bechuanaland to establish the facts.

Colonel H. Marshall Hole, author of "The Making of Rhodesia", then chipped in with clear proof that some of the dates given by Sir John Harris were inaccurate. Even so, Ramonotwane would still have been a very old man.

Dr. Maurice Ernest, biologist and founder of the Centenarian Club in London – the aim of which is to investigate the means by which health and vigour may be retained beyond the century – dashed into the fray at an early stage. He had investigated many claims, and the longest life he had ever been able to confirm was One hundred and thirteen years. That was Pierre Joubert, a French-Canadian who

[3] In 1943 the youngest son of Msilikazi died at Empandeni Mission, Southern Rhodesia, at the reputed age of 110 years.

died early last century.[4] Ernest offered to reimburse Sir John Harris up to a limit of £250 if Ramonotwane stood up to a scientific examination in London.

A stupid challenge, for there are no physical tests which will fix a man's age. Moreover, as Sir John Harris replied, it would not do the old man any good to take him out of his healthy desert surroundings and transport him to London.

No decision was reached in London – it was impossible. However, there was a distinguished visitor in Ramonotwane's kraal in August 1938, and his opinions are interesting. He was the late Dr. Robert Broom, D.Sc., F.R.S., the anthropologist, who nearly became a centenarian himself. Dr. Broom enlisted the influence of Tshekedi Khama, regent of the Bamangwato, who lent him his own scribe as interpreter.

The visitors found Ramonotwane resting in the sun, a favourite occupation. He wore a woollen cap, khaki shirt and trousers, an old air force greatcoat and sandals. Dr. Broom described Ramonotwane as well-nourished, vigorous, and not unduly wrinkled. His heart and pulse

[4] Inevitably the claims made on behalf of Ramonotwane reminded various people of other almost incredibly ancient characters. Mr. R. W. Hamilton of Hadlow Down vouched for one Bilai bin Suliman bin Ahmed of Zanzibar, and I cannot resist a quotation from this letter. "He was chief gunner in the navy of the Sultan of Muscat, and arrived in Zanzibar with Seyyid Said bin Sultan in 1832," Mr. Hamilton wrote. "He was then retired from the sea and appointed to take charge of the Palace flag, a post which he held for eighty years in the enjoyment of all his bodily faculties. His papers were destroyed in the bombardment of the palace in 1836, but he can hardly have retired as chief gunner under thirty-five, which would make him one hundred and fifteen at the time of his death. And he may have been ten years older than that."

were satisfactory. The blindness was due to cataract. His forehead was scarred as a result of a knobkerrie injury. In his report he emphasized that it was impossible to fix a centenarian's age from physical examination. Dr. Broom, however, accepted the historical evidence that he was born some months before Khama's father Sekgoma, who was born in or about 1797. That brought Ramonotwane up to an age of one hundred and forty; and as he died seven years later, Dr. Broom's estimate gave him nearly a century and a half of life.

I cannot accept that, even though it came from such a renowned anatomist as Dr. Broom, authority on primitive man. Obviously there was a mistake in the date of Sekgoma's birth; it is also probable that Ramonotwane was mistaken in thinking that he had been born in the same year.

Mr. Paver had formed the opinion that Ramonotwane must have been born between the years 1815 and 1817, the earlier date being more probable. He cross-examined one of Ramonotwane's sons, a man of seventy, who stated that his earliest memory of his father was of a grey-haired man.

Someone asked Ramonotwane how many children he had, and the old man replied: "If we sat here till the sun went down we would still not have counted them all."

Ramonotwane remembered the missionary Robert Moffat, who first arrived in Bechuanaland in 1820; and David Livingstone, who travelled in the territory in the middle of last century.

It was a memorable interview, and it ended with Dr. Broom presenting Ramonotwane with a new warm blanket. "Half the secret of his age is in his teeth," Dr. Broom summed up. "The other half is the spirit which animates him; it shines out in enthusiasm, humour or pathos."

I believe there is medical support for the Mechnikov theory that people who drink

sour milk regularly (for example, Russian peasants) tend to avoid intestinal poisoning and thus reach extreme old age. Ramonotwane took sour milk in his simple diet, consisting mainly of porridge and a little meat. He insisted on having a hot bath every day, and regarded this luxury, on the edge of the Kalahari, as important. At one time Ramonotwane had smoked dagga, but his chief stopped him. Evidently it had done him no harm.

If it could be shown that the human body is utterly incapable of lasting as many years as Ramonotwane is supposed to have lived, then the strongest evidence would have to be set aside, even though it seemed flawless. Can a human being live for one hundred and thirty years? Admittedly, no such life span has ever been proved. The nearest approach to it was that of Robert Bowman of Cumberland, who died in 1823 in his one hundred and nineteenth year. Some authorities accept Bowman, others are dubious. There is a gap between one hundred and thirteen and one hundred and thirty; but is seventeen years far beyond the bounds of possibility? I would not care to fix the age of Ramonotwane too closely, but I am prepared to believe that he was, in his day, the oldest man in Africa.

In the Kimberley Museum you will find a portrait of a Bushman named Daniel, who died in 1933 at the reputed age of one hundred and eighteen years. The museum authorities investigated his story during his lifetime and decided that he was probably born in the second decade of last century, possibly in 1815. I wish Daniel and Ramonotwane could have been brought together.

Daniel could drink a pint bottle of wine without a pause. For many years he slaked his thirst by means of a pension of a shilling paid to him every Wednesday and Saturday by Mr. L. T. Shone, a Kimberley resident. Daniel had signed away his skull

in return for these bi-weekly payments, but I never heard whether this grim souvenir of the centenarian was claimed.

Another very old native who died in 1933 was James Molife, who claimed to be a survivor of an impi that was shattered by Andries Pretorius in 1838 at the Blood River battle. His age was estimated at one hundred and fifteen years. He settled at Ladysmith and became a true patriarch, with a horde of greatgrandchildren round him. Whether he was a true centenarian is another matter.

I am less dubious about the Zulu woman Ukati ("the Cat"), who was still alive in 1933, and said to be one hundred and fifteen, like Molife. According to her story, her mother had fled from Chaka's blood-lust at a time when all female babies were being killed. Ukati married one of Dingaan's warriors. Her husband was present at the massacre of Piet Retief and his men in 1838 and told her about it.

Now it is possible for a woman with ordinary knowledge of Zulu history to invent a narrative like that and repeat it until she believes it herself. Ukati, however, described one incident so vividly that every investigator accepted it as fact. She was lying in her hut just before her first child was born when, as she put it, "suddenly the sun covered its face". That was the total eclipse of March 1839, and before the shadow of the moon had passed, her child was born.

Why should a primitive Zulu woman invent such a story? False or true, she created an episode worthy of a novelist. The final point in favour of Ukati's truthfulness was found in her descendants. Ukati's daughter was living with her, and the daughter had four sons, three grandsons and one great-grandson. I shall never know whether Ukati told the truth about her age, but if she did lie, she lied magnificently.

One of the oldest men of his day, known to thousands of South Africans, was Abraham, the Bushman. I had many conversations with this wise and friendly old fellow, both in the Kalahari in 1936 and during Abraham's famous visit to Johannesburg. It was impossible to doubt that Abraham had passed the century mark, and the estimate of one hundred and nine years when he died must have been fairly accurate.

The late Mr. Donald Bain, desert guide and hunter who took Abraham to Johannesburg, made every effort to check this estimate. Among other things he discovered that Abraham was present at the death of Robert Lewis, the Kalahari trader, who died in 1894 after being mauled by a leopard. "Ah, I was an old man then – I was bald," declared Abraham.

Almost to the day of his death Abraham took part in the strenuous Bushman dances. They buried him under a tree I know well, far out in the Kalahari where the dusty Nossob river-bed joins the dry Auob. There Abraham rests, a genuine centenarian who loved the desert.

For a number of years the most celebrated white centenarian in South Africa was Mr. Pieter Chandler Pringle of Germiston. You could not call him an impostor, but when he claimed to be one hundred and twenty one (not long before his death in 1951) I felt there was a mistake somewhere. After his death his marriage certificate came to light, bearing the date April 11, 1893 and showing that he had given his age then as forty-seven. So he was a mere one hundred and five when he died.

I have often marvelled at the peace of mind of the centenarian; probably the key to the mystery of longevity. However, they usually have strong views on diet. "Eat plenty of honey and mealies, enjoy the fresh air and avoid quarrels and troubles," advised Mr. Pringle.

Occasionally you find a centenarian with highly original ideas. As a group, however, they have much in common. They are people with keen appetites, often poor; hard workers who keep going as long as they can; kindly conscientious, cheerful people. Many of them were frail in early life and had to learn to look after themselves. Many admit that they have had serious illnesses. If you analyse their diets you will find a preference for coarse wholemeal bread. They take water and milk rather than tea and coffee. The men are seldom lifelong teetotallers, and many of them are (or have been) smokers.

Among the more austere centenarians was Oupa Zietsman of Barkly East, one hundred and seven years old in 1924 when he gave his views. “Never enter a ballroom, never talk scandal, never go into a bar,” warned Oupa Zietsman.

I have been dealing with so many male centenarians that you may have gathered a false impression. Women stand a much better chance than men of reaching the century, and this has been proved in one Union census after another. In 1931, for example, the nine white centenarians included only one man.

Another fact which emerges from the statistics is that the best place to reach the century is a town or village in the Cape countryside. In one year, all the white centenarians belonged to the Cape Province. Malmesbury proved its claim as a town of very old people when a birthday party was organized by the mayor in 1936 at the town hall in honour of Mr. Kasparus (“Oom Kalie”) Steyn, aged one hundred. The guests were thirty men and women, all over eighty years of age.

A coloured centenarian of Malmesbury who turned one hundred in 1949 was Dirk Jasson. He fixed the date of his birth by the anti-convict agitation. Dirk worked as a mason until he was almost ninety. He differed from “Oom Kalie” in one respect, for he was a moderate smoker.

A country magistrate once told me the most amusing centenarian story I have heard. Relations of a man of ninety-eight applied for him to be placed on the “Black List”, and said that he was spending all his money on drink and endangering his health.

“I have only £30, which I am spending on port wine, brandy and beer,” declared the ancient one in a deep, strong voice. “My teeth have gone and the liquor keeps me alive. As to my health, I have outlived all my friends.”

The order was refused, and the old man went away chuckling and vowing that he would not leave his descendants a penny. He lived to be a hundred – and kept his promise.

Those who dislike the austere type of centenarian may take heart when they think of Mr. R. H. Thomas of Rondebosch, one hundred and one when he died in 1947. He ate heartily, smoked fairly heavily all his life, and thoroughly enjoyed a drink. Mr. Thomas went to bed so late that his relatives tried to trick him by making all the clocks in the house an hour fast. He was not deceived, and retired towards midnight; but he made up for this indulgence by sleeping late and getting up after lunch.

Only when nearing the century did Mr. Thomas find his hair becoming a little thin on top. Throughout his life he had washed his hair every day with soap and cold water. He never wore glasses. Mr. Thomas was a great walker, however, and until he was well into his eighties he often strolled into Cape Town from Newlands.

In the nineteen-twenties there were still a few people with fragmentary memories of the abolition of slavery and the Great Trek. I met some who had watched the convict ship Neptune enter Table Bay in 1849, and the Alabama coming in fourteen years later.

“Men do not usually die; they kill themselves,” remarked Montaigne. No one looks forward to old age, though most of us hope to live long. The centenarians set us an example and show that it can be done.



Chapter 3
THROWING THE BONES

GOOI KOOKWATER waar daar goëlery is. Yes, the Afrikaans proverb has a great deal of wisdom in it. “Throw boiling water where there is witchcraft.” Most of those who “throw the bones” and indulge in other forms of black magic are impostors. Boiling water turns many a ghost into a scalded human. Nevertheless a growing number of scientists now admit that the human mind is capable of achievements which cannot be explained by any known laws. Telepathy has been proved by Professor Rhine; though I must say that I thought the Piddingtons were no more than clever tricksters. There is also much evidence in favour of clairvoyance, the ability to see beyond the range of normal sight. These powers are not confined to white people working under Rhine’s laboratory conditions. South Africa must have known the *dolosgooier,* the man who throws the bones, for thousands of years before the first white man arrived. This dark art came from the caves of Europe with the Bushman and was passed on to the Hottentots.

I saw the well-known alternative process once, performed by an old, pure Hottentot very far from civilisation. He used the entrails of a sheep instead of the bones, and predicted a happy and successful journey, very like the less imaginative fortune-tellers of the cities. It proved nothing, and I often wish that I had devised an exacting test for the old man

and made him earn his tobacco. However, I have heard many tales of the skill of *dolosgooiers,* and some appear to be authentic.

As a rule the bones come from the backbone of some small animal, but horns and hooves are used. Some wizards read the future with four bones, others require ten times that number. Fragments of ivory and the stones of wild fruits serve the same purpose. You smooth the sand, blow on the bones and cast them before you like dice, so that they form a pattern. The bones are used mainly to find lost cattle, though sickness and the causes of death are often diagnosed with the aid of the bones. In wild country the *dolosgooier* predicts the fortunes of the hunt. Bushmen rely on the bones almost every day of their lives, and a Bushman will sometimes rise uneasily during the night and consult the bones to find out whether there are lions about.

The Rev. S. S. Dornan, who knew all the Kalahari people intimately, made a study of the bones. He said that only once in his life in the desert had he encountered a woman who could use the divining bones. It is almost entirely a male art.

Soon after World War I, two constables of the old South West Africa Police were following stock-thieves in the Gobabis district when they came to a Bushman werf. The little Bushmen were friendly, and Constable Anthony Pebroe gave them tobacco. Next day an old Bushman offered to “throw the bones” and visualise the end of their chase. Pebroe was sceptical, but he agreed.

“I see you coming to a great bush just as the sun is rising,” declared the Bushman, studying the bones. “There are many Bushmen at that place. Be very careful – I can see an arrow sticking in the belly of your horse.”

Pondering over this cheering information Pebroe and his fellow policeman rode off with their coloured guides. At sunrise next day they did come to a thick patch of bush, and then Pebroe noticed some Bushmen running for cover. He galloped after them amid a shower of poisoned arrows. One arrow glanced off Pebroe's helmet. Soon afterwards his horse collapsed and died. Pebroe found the arrow.

Pebroe had other experiences with the *dolosgooiers,* for he became interested in the business and never missed a consultation if he could help it. One prediction, startling in its accuracy, was made shortly after he became engaged. He and his fiancée met an old Hottentot shepherd, and Pebroe asked him to throw the bones for them. "The bones have fallen in different ways," said the shepherd. "You will never marry." And so it turned out.

Mr. L. R. Breytenbach, a public prosecutor in three provinces of the Union, often met the *dolosgooiers,* and confessed that they left him completely baffled. He thought the Shangaans of the Transvaal were the most skilful operators. When anyone approached one of them he would name his fee, tell his patron which pocket he kept the money in, and often he would describe the purpose of the visit.

In 1919, when Mr. Breytenbach was stationed in the Bethal district, he went to a *dolosgooier* with a farmer who had lost four oxen during the ploughing season. Old Jannewaine the *dolosgooier* described the four missing oxen and advised a search "on the side where the sun comes up, along the path by the two mountains". Sure enough, that was where the oxen had strayed.

Mr. Breytenbach's most dramatic experience came about in the Northern Transvaal, as a result of a girl's request to a practitioner named Jilongo to throw the bones. She was a temporary typist, as the court typist was on leave in Durban. They

locked the door so that the magistrate would not catch them practising black magic, and then Jilongo delivered his judgment.

"The *nonnie* does not sit in her own chair, but in place of someone else," Jilongo began. "The owner of the chair is by the great waters. I think she is ill, she is so white. This is not nice. *Ek het klaar gepraat."*

When a *dolosgooier* says he has finished he usually allows no questions and Jilongo could not be persuaded to continue. Soon afterwards, however, a telegram arrived from the Department of justice offering the temporary typist a permanent job. The girl on leave in Durban had resigned owing to the death of her mother. Coincidence? It may have been nothing more. But here is another story which many ex-soldiers who were in Tobnik must remember. A Zulu soldier threw the bones on June 20, 1942, shortly before the German attack, and predicted the fall. Every detail was checked and recorded by the Rev. James Chutter, senior chaplain with the Second South African Division. (I flew to the Middle East in the same aircraft as Chutter, but escaped his fate as a prisoner-of-war.) The Zulu. announced: "Mkize will come and take us all away." Native troops used the word Mkize (possibly derived from Mkaiser of World War I) for the Germans. At the time of the prophecy Tobruk was regarded as impregnable, but before dawn the desert fortress had fallen.

Students of Zulu history will recall the famous incident when the monster Chaka murdered his own mother quietly in the night. Then he called his *dolosgooiers* together and asked them to find the murderer. The wizards gave several names, but finally one crafty old fellow whispered respectfully: "Nkosinkulu, you killed her yourself." Chaka executed the false prophets and installed the old man as his soothsayer.

The late Colonel H. F. Trew of the South African Police, one of the most valuable informants I ever had, told me that he had made a special study of the methods of the *dolosgooier*. He thought that many of their feats could be explained by a clever intelligence system, for these men had spies everywhere. Yet there were still episodes which Colonel Trew was unable to explain.

Early this century Trew met a *dolosgooier* at Gaberones in Bechuanaland, and heard such a sensational story about this native that he investigated it in detail. It was said that the *dolosgooier* had thrown the bones for a Major Bird at the time when Colonel Plumer's force was advancing in an attempt to relieve Mafeking. The major had great difficulty in persuading the *dolosgooier* to relate what the bones indicated, but under pressure the native said that he saw Major Bird lying dead, face downwards, with nine bullets in him. He also described the surroundings; a sandy patch encircled by bush.

Captain "Puggy" Manning of the South African Constabulary, later commandant of the police training depot, confirmed the whole story. Major Bird was found after the fight at Ramathalabama exactly as the *dolosgooier* said; face down in the sand, with had nine bullets in his body.

In the realm of telepathy many thousands of primitive natives display inexplicable powers. They have never heard of extra-sensory perception, but strange tales are told – some which can never be proved now, others which stand up to every test.

A friend of mine was brought up on a farm in Southern Rhodesia. His family abandoned the place in 1927, but it remained unsold. Twenty-two years later his brother went back unannounced and camped beside the ruined homestead to revive boyhood memories. He had only just settled down when three elderly

natives arrived and saluted. They were the former cook, houseboy and head cattleman. “How is the young master? “ they inquired, beaming with pleasure.

The young master spent some time trying to find out how they had discovered his presence. They had come from a native reserve some way away, and no one could possibly have informed them that a member of the family was returning to the derelict farm.

They could not explain it. “We knew,” they replied to every question. “We knew.”

One of the early tales of telepathy in South Africa followed the British reverse at Isandhlwana during the Zulu war of 1879. Frank Brownlee, magistrate and author, declared that details of the battle were given by an old native woman to Europeans in King Williamstown, then a garrison town, on the very day of the disaster. The distance was seven hundred miles, and there was no telegraph. “I knew,” said the old woman.

My friend Colonel Trew set down chapter and verse of an incident during the 1906 Zulu rebellion. Trew was talking to a son of Sir Theophilus Shepstone on the steps of the Pretoria Club when an old Zulu passed. “Is there any news from Zululand today?” asked Shepstone.

The Zulu replied that there had been a fight at Mome Gorge, the previous evening and that Bambata had been killed and his impi “stamped flat”. Trew went at once to a government official who was in touch with the rebellion, but the official knew nothing. Two hours later, however, a telegram from the Governor of Natal confirmed the old Zulu’s story.

The death of Gordon at Khartoum, it is said, was bazaar talk in Mombasa and other places more than two thousand miles to the south the following day. During every African campaign news has

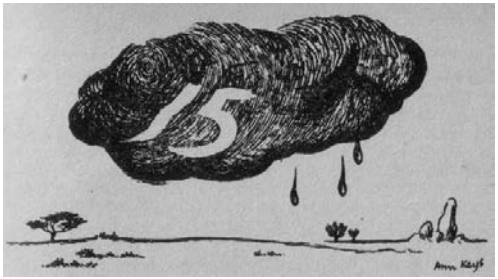
flashed up and down the continent in this mysterious way. The rising of Lobengula in 1893 was known almost immediately to natives over wide areas of South Africa.

The late Mr. Owen Letcher, the South African author and traveller often related an experience of his own when travelling in the wilds of North-Eastern Rhodesia in 1911. He was among the Wanda tribe, and one night he heard the women lamenting. They told him that their menfolk, serving in the King's African Rifles in a Somaliland campaign, had just been wiped out in battle. Six weeks later Mr. Letcher confirmed the story.

Probably the most famous example of native telepathy occurred during the South African War, when a large number of Boer prisoners were in camp on the island of St. Helena, seventeen hundred miles from Cape Town. Mr. A. J. Williams, then serving in the Royal Army Medical Corps, recorded the incident, and there are many people still living who could support his statement.

Before dawn one morning Mr. Williams heard the Boer prisoners in Deadwood Camp singing hymns, according to custom. Then the singing stopped, and he found the prisoners in excited groups. The flag over the camp was at half-mast. Mr. Williams asked them what had happened. They informed him that their native servants (who had accompanied their masters into exile from South Africa) had told them that President Kruger's wife had died.

The camp commandant telephoned the cable station near Jamestown, but no such news had been received. Later that morning, however, a cable arrived confirming the news of the death of Mrs. Kruger.



Chapter 4
SOME PROPHECIES CAME TRUE

ONCE I was told to write the death notice of a prophet. Newspapers of thirty years ago gave space generously to the passing of a picturesque character, whereas today you have to be important to secure more than a few lines. Nicolaas Pieter Johannes van Rensburg was a *takhaar*, a simple Transvaal farmer who had visions; and he influenced the course of history in South Africa.

It is said that the Afrikaner race possesses, to a greater degree than most other peoples, the gift of prophecy – if indeed there is such a gift. President Kruger spoke of visions, and he had a mysterious knack of guiding a hunting party towards unseen game. Of course it may have been nothing more than experience above the average acquired through the normal sense channels. (There are people like my friend Scott-Haigh who will forecast the result of a general election in the Union with such accuracy, and in such detail, that it looks like clairvoyance; in fact, it is no more than a deep knowledge of politics.) Some prophets are so vague that their utterances may be made to fit almost any later event. Yet in the careers of a few prophets one discovers a point where ordinary intelligent anticipation seems to end and true, vivid prophecy comes into the picture. I must say that the life of Van Rensburg, the famous "Siener" van Rensburg, leaves me with that impression.

It was in March 1926 that Nicolaas van Rensburg died. Parliament was in session, and I went to Mr. Harm Oost, M.L.A., the

friendly *oudstryder* representing Pretoria District, knowing that he had been in gaol with Van Rensburg after the 1914 Rebellion. “Was he really a prophet?” I asked.

“No one who knew him well could help believing in him,” Harm Oost replied. “We called him Oom Klasie. He was a most lovable personality, a kind-hearted humanitarian, very religious, a great Bible student, and extremely modest and sincere.”

Harm Oost described the prophet as he had seen him at a recent meeting: a man of sixty with faraway grey eyes, a dense beard streaked with grey, lean and with a musical voice.

“Very often Oom Klasie saw all sorts of symbols and images in the sky,” Harm Oost recalled. “He saw bulls of different colours fighting, herds of springbok, all sorts of animals. Everything depended on the interpretation, of course, and on many occasions Oom Klasie could give no help in that direction. He declared that he did not always know the meaning of what he saw. However, there were times when his visions were so definite that he could feel and hear some future experience.

“One day in the Fort at Johannesburg, where we were imprisoned, Oom Klasie told us then he had seen himself going home by train. It was so realistic that he had felt the movement and heard the whistle; and at the end of the journey he had seen himself talking to his wife at Wolmaransstad.”

Harm Oost discussed this vision with the prophet, who supplied an interesting detail. Certain prisoners were passing out of the gate when one man was called back for something he had forgotten. Warders at the Fort knew nothing of an order for the release of prisoners. Some of the men approached the commandant; but he, too, was in the dark. Late that night, however, instructions arrived giving a number of

rebels their freedom; and among them was the prophet Van Rensburg. As the men went out, a warder called: *"Oom Jan, Oom Jan, jy vergeet jou stoel."* And one man returned to pick up the riempie stool he had made in prison.

Such was Harm Oost's evidence in favour of Van Rensburg, and it made me eager to hear more of this strange character. I met other men who had known him; and in unexpected places I gathered significant episodes in his career.

Nicolaas van Rensburg appears to have been a quiet, almost timid child. He was born in 1862 and he spent his early years on the farm Rietkuil near Ottosdal in the Western Transvaal. When he was eleven or twelve the farmers suspected that the natives were planning a rising, but young Van Rensburg had an early vision and told his parents they would be perfectly safe on the farm. He was right. That was the first important prophecy he made. For some time before that he had been seeing visions, but he had not mentioned them to anyone. Finally he felt impelled to speak.

Sixteen was military age in the republic, and at sixteen Nicolaas van Rensburg went out on commando against a rebellious native chief. He had his baptism of fire, suffering nothing worse than an attack of malaria on the way home. It was during the South African War that he made his reputation as a prophet. Harm Oost declared that Siener van Rensburg knew from the start that there would be years of war and that the forces of the Republics would be defeated. Nevertheless, the prophet went right through the war, and the time soon came when his accurate forecasts made him a person of influence.

Van Rensburg served under a number of Boer generals – Du Toit, De la Rey, Hertzog, Kemp and the great Christian de Wet. He moved from one commando to another at will, seeking anxious leaders and advising them. And if Nicolaas van

Rensburg said there were no British troops in the neighbourhood, the burghers went to sleep without posting a sentry. It was an easy-going system, but it worked.

Often the prophet gave warning of the approach of the enemy. He would have a vision of hats and shoes lying about in disorder, and that meant a hasty departure. In another vision he watched a huge troop of yellow baboons with short tails climbing a nek in the Magaliesberg range. They were the British, he said, and thanks to this information Commandant Jordaan was able to capture a whole British convoy with valuable stores.

Van Rensburg's prophecies appear in many records and reminiscences of the South African War. He figured in General Hertzog's war diary. Professor C. M. van den Heever declared that Van Rensburg saved President Steyn from capture by urging him to hide in the Bushveld. General De la Rey trusted the prophet implicitly, and his capture of Field Marshal Lord Methuen at Tweebos appears to have been due very largely to Van Rensburg's advice.

Among the close friends of the prophet on commando was a burgher named H. W. R. Kluever, who noted many of Van Rensburg's sayings carefully and saw the predictions come true. Kluever was present in 1901 when the prophet informed General De la Rey that a messenger would arrive next day from a westerly direction. Next day a man rode in from German South West Africa, bearing an important letter from Dr. Leyds, who was then in Europe.

General De la Rey sent Kluever to the Transvaal with official dispatches. "I can see my friend Kluever returning – he is riding a white horse," announced the prophet one day. Kluever arrived in camp at the expected time, but the horse was grey. Van Rensburg looked disappointed; then a thought occurred to him. "When you crossed the Vaal River, what sort of

horse were you riding?" inquired the prophet.

"A white horse," Kluever replied.

A queer prediction which some may regard as a failure was made by Van Rensburg when his commandant, Potgieter, asked whether he would survive the South African War.

"Set your mind at rest – I have seen you in the last battle," Van Rensburg replied.

Potgieter took part in the last battle, but he was killed. Towards the end of the war Van Rensburg foretold the Treaty of Vereeniging, and he was credited with giving a wealth of detail which placed his description beyond guesswork. Then he returned to his farm Rietkuil in the Wolmaransstad district with his reputation as a prophet firmly established.

As early as 1911 Van Rensburg had his first visions of World War I, a world on fire and again the great bulls, six or seven red and grey bulls, in mortal combat in the sky.

Then came the 1913 strike on the Rand. Among the burghers who were called up was the prophet's brother. "Don't worry, you'll be home in about a fortnight," remarked the prophet. In a fortnight the trouble was over.

Far more serious developments lay over the horizon, and many friends noted Siener van Rensburg's prophecies. This was the period when many people were influenced by his reputation, and the shape of things to come as the Siener envisaged them. Whether the Siener himself intended to wield such influence is another matter. He was a mild, peace-loving man. His friends remember that he never spoke ill of Botha and Smuts, though he was in the opposite political camp. Those who were close to Van Rensburg declared that he disliked talking politics, and it was almost impossible to draw him out. It must also be borne in

mind that this humble prophet was often unable to interpret his own symbolic visions. “If he duped others, he duped himself,” wrote a man who was no friend of Siener van Rensburg.

Van Rensburg never pretended to be able to call up visions at will. He told his friends that he was most likely to see into the future if he lay on his left side with one hand under his head.

He lost control of his lachrymal glands in middle-age, and was always wiping the tears away. This gave some people a false impression of him.

Several years before the outbreak of World War I the prophet beheld a huge number 15 against a dark cloud from which blood issued. Then he saw General De la Rey returning home without his hat, followed by a carriage covered with flowers.

This was Van Rensburg’s most famous prophecy, and by far the most dramatic of his career. There was no doubt about it, and many who are still living heard it. But at the risk of being wise after the event, I must say that Van Rensburg’s words should have sounded ominous. In the Western Transvaal, however, the vision was interpreted as some high honour which was to be bestowed on General De la Rey. The prophet himself inclined towards that belief, though he took up the familiar attitude that he did not know exactly what it meant. General De la Rey, who had such great faith in the prophet, must have spent many, many hours pondering over the meaning of those words.

A restless spirit prevailed in the Western Transvaal after the outbreak of World War I, for it seemed to a section of the *Oudstryders* that this was their chance of regaining the independence of the old republics. Siener Van Rensburg’s prophecies appeared to favour this belief, thus adding to the excitement.

One man who could have put a spark to this gunpowder was General De la Rey. Tension mounted when it became known that on August 15 the General would address a meeting at Treurfontein in the district. Hundreds of excited burghers attended that meeting with their own horses, rifles, ammunition and rations. They were ready to obey any order given by General De la Rey.

“Go home and await events,” was the unexpected advice uttered by De la Rey. “Remain cool and calm.” So the burghers rode home, and the rebellion in that district was delayed. Wise old General Botha, the Prime Minister of the period, had seen the danger and persuaded General de la Rey to stand by the government.

There were many who would have listened avidly to Siener van Rensburg at that meeting. The prophet disappointed them by remaining on his farm.

Meanwhile a conspiracy was being organized by General C. F. Beyers to start a rebellion, with September 15 as the date. Beyers counted on De la Rey’s help. The two generals met in Pretoria, and on the evening of September 15 they drove towards Johannesburg together by car. No one will ever know what passed through the mind of General de la Rey that day, but the figure 15 must often have risen before him.

In the light of later events it seems probable that General Beyers intended to rush De la Rey to Potchefstroom, where thousands of Active Citizen Force men were in camp. Beyers hoped that the inspiring figure of De la Rey would tip the scale in favour of rebellion. De la Rey may or may not have been fully aware of the plot.

That night fate joined in the drama. Bandits known as the “Foster gang” had entered a house at Turffontein, robbed and murdered a man, and escaped in a stolen

motor-car. All cars were being stopped by a police cordon round the city; and the force had special orders to see that a car with three men in it – members of the armed and dangerous gang – did not escape. The police had instructions to fire on any car which ignored their challenge.

Beyers knew nothing of this. When his car was challenged he imagined that the police were trying to arrest him, and he told his driver to defy them. Again and again the police sprang out and were left behind. Then one constable fired and General de la Rey was killed.

So the meaning of the prophecy was revealed at last ... the number 15, General de la Rey returning home without his hat, the carriage covered with flowers. “Some high honour,” Van Rensburg had said. General de la Rey was given a State funeral.

Always there was some truth in the visions of Van Rensburg, and his own inability (at times, but not always) to interpret the symbols made one of the most baffling sides of his nature. Sometimes previous experience guided him; he knew some of the friendly and unfriendly symbols. But with all his strange power he could not save his friend De la Rey, though he would certainly have done so if he could have guessed the truth behind his mysterious vision.

Siener van Rensburg rode away from his farm and joined the rebels, but he carried no arms. Once again he took up the position of trusted adviser. Again he saw the enemy in the form of animals. General Kemp was his leader. Kemp listened carefully to everything that Van Rensburg had to say. When they were in the desert to the west of Kuruman the rebels ran short of water. Kemp decided to make for a well, but the prophet told him it was being guarded by government troops. Kemp then approached cautiously, saw the troops over the dunes and estimated

that his forces were strong enough to take the position. He was successful. Later on Kemp was almost surrounded, but Van Rensburg indicated the way out and the rebels escaped. There came a time, however, when the rebel commando was rounded up. Van Rensburg had forecast capture, and told his comrades that they would be taken to Johannesburg by train.

I have already mentioned the prophet's experiences in the Fort. He had to submit to his beard being shaved off, and this he looked upon as one of the great humiliations of his life. It was not often that his philosophic outlook deserted him.

During the last year of World War I, the prophet told his friends in the Wolmaransstad district that a great plague would sweep the world, and that South Africa would be affected. In the month of October came the so-called Spanish influenza, a scourge more deadly than bubonic plague.

Two white horses, tired and thin, appeared before Van Rensburg's eyes after the armistice. He had seen horses like that before, and thus he was able to find a meaning. It was the post-war depression.

Towards the end of 1921 there was a meeting between General Christian de Wet and Siener van Rensburg at the house of Mr. Gert Malan, principal of the Roodepoort farm school near Dewetsdorp, Orange Free State. The wives of Mr. Malan and General de Wet, and a Mr. Cornelis Kruger, were also present. After lunch General de Wet announced that the prophet had something to say.

"I do not know exactly what it means," began the prophet in his traditional manner, "but I have seen General de Wet riding south from Bloemfontein with thousands of people following him. At the same time there was a dark cloud over Johannesburg."

Then Van Rensburg turned to Kruger (a Hollander by birth) and went on: "Hollandertjie, you are also under the dark cloud, but God will protect you and not a hair on your head will be harmed."

Six months later General de Wet died in Bloemfontein. The General's horse followed the coffin, and thousands made their way in procession to the Women's Monument, south of the town, for the burial of the South African War hero.

Martial law was in force in Johannesburg at that time. The revolution was on, and there was fighting along the length of the Reef. Cornelis Kruger had to pass through the danger zone on urgent business. He was warned by the railway authorities that he would have to travel at his own risk; and indeed some of the bullets passed very close to him. He was one of those who had reason to remember that prophecy of Siener van Rensburg.

Kruger provided a sidelight on General de Wet's attitude towards Van Rensburg. They were talking over old times on the veld during the South African War and the Rebellion when the General remarked: "Ou Nicolaas, if you imagine that you are a prophet I'll knock you out. When you saw those visions, that was God working on our behalf."

I have said that the prophet disliked political discussions. In December 1923, however, he informed a Vryburg farmer, Mr. B. Mussman, that General Smuts would soon dissolve Parliament and hold a general election, and that the Nationalists would win. Mussman said he could not believe it, because Parliament had only been elected in 1921. Nevertheless, General Smuts dissolved Parliament a few months later, and the Nationalist-Labour government came into power.

As far back as 1925 the prophet saw a wagon leaving Cape Town, a Boer flag and thousands of men and women round a

koppie. “It is not a war, it is a trek,” he said. Years afterwards his hearers realised that they had been given the first description of the Voortrekker centenary celebrations held in 1938.

Towards the end of his life Siener van Rensburg had a vision which was interpreted (after the event) to refer to the 1926 alluvial diamond rush at Lichtenburg. Sometime before that the prophet had a clear vision of one of his sons holding a diamond as large as a man’s thumb. This son went to the diggings, worked hard for six months, and then wrote home saying that he had found nothing. He had given up hope, and suggested returning home. “Try again for a few more days,” advised the father. The son turned up a forty-carat diamond. “Now your luck has ended – let your brother take over,” wrote the father. The brother had a marvellous run of luck, finding small diamonds almost every week he was on the diggings.

Five of the last prophecies made by Siener van Rensburg were printed in the “Cape Times” on March 16, 1926, and today his reputation might stand or fall by those remarkable predictions alone. The newspaper files bear witness.

(1) *Hereniging* is shaping itself on the horizon with the shade of General Botha hovering over all. (Fusion of the South African Party and the old Nationalist Party came about in 1933.)

(2) There will be an orgy of war in which white and black will be equally involved. (An easy prophecy ten years later, but in 1926 there were no such fears anywhere in the world.)

(3) A mealie harvest will be wasted. (Too vague. No areas or dates given.)

(4) A new diamond mine will be discovered. (Alexander Bay the following year.)

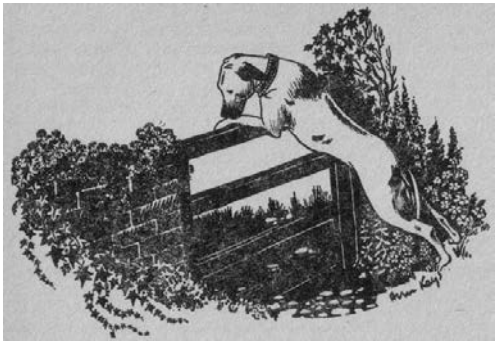
(5) Afrikaner exiles will return from the Argentine. (They did.) Siener van Rensburg is said to have foreseen his own death, which occurred on March 11, 1926 on his farm Rietkuil in the Wolmaransstad district. More than eight hundred people attended the funeral of the gentle and beloved prophet.

One of the officiating ministers took as his text Van Rensburg's own motto: *"Die Here regeer"*.

Van Rensburg's sons Niklaas and Johannes remained on the farm after their father's death.

I never met the man, but I can imagine him from Harm Oost's story. "When a vision appeared, he felt a pressure in his head," said Harm Oost. "Then he would go off by himself and fall into a sort of trance. If you had known that man you would believe in him now."

It is difficult not to believe in Siener van Rensburg. His very mistakes suggest that he saw visions, and he never pretended that his is interpretations were unerring.



Chapter 5
THE RIDGEBACK MYSTERY

HUMANS LOVE dogs and mysteries. That may explain why the Rhodesian ridgeback has become South Africa's favourite dog. Whenever I study the fiddle-shaped strip of hair bent forwards, the strange escutcheon of the breed, I find myself trying to peer through the mists of time in search of the origin of this magnificent, fawn-coloured hound.

Many ridgeback owners have accepted a theory that the ancestors of their dogs came long ago from the island of Phu Quoc in the Gulf of Siam. Nowhere else in the world, except South Africa and Phu Quoc, are ridged dogs part of the scenery. Moreover the South African ridgeback strongly resembles the Phu Quoc dog in build, height, weight and colour. You find the ridge more prominent in the Phu Quoc, but that is a detail. These dogs have ancestors in common, and the ridge proclaims them as blood relatives in spite of the thousands of miles of sea which separate them.

Any layman who enters the sacred realm of thoroughbred dogs and upsets firm beliefs is liable to find a growling pack of owners snapping at his heels. I am taking this risk when I declare firmly that our popular ridgebacks did not come from Indo-China. All the experts say so, and all the experts are wrong. It is a romantic story, an old story with twists and surprises.

According to the experts, the natives of Phu Quoc bred their ridgebacks as hunting



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dogs and sold them on the mainland of Indochina. Phoenician traders, or some other very early navigators, brought specimens of the Phu Quoc to South Africa, and so the ridge appeared in many of the dogs owned by the Hottentots.

Captain T. C. Hawley and Mr. G. C. Dry, in a brochure published by the Transvaal Rhodesian Ridgeback Club in 1949, suggested that the Hottentots, who have Asiatic features, migrated overland all the way from the East, bringing Phu Quoc dogs with them. This would have been a remarkable journey, both for dogs and men. But there was no such journey.

Ridgeback owners regard their dogs as true South Africans, the only pure-bred dogs that really belong to the country. I hope to show that the ridgeback is an ever better South African than proud owners imagine. I make bold to say that the ridgeback has no canine Indo-Chinese blood.

First of all, what is a ridgeback? The breed is so new that standards vary, and if my description does not tally with the views of the experts I shall be torn to pieces. (Yes, the dog world is a jealous world.) However, an owner I trust tells me that the most important point of all is the mysterious ridge, and a dog without a clearly-defined ridge is not recognised as a member of the breed. “The ridge should be tapering and symmetrical and should include two identical “crowns” opposite one another. Moreover, the ridge should start just behind the shoulders (where it is broad) and should continue up to a point between the prominence of the hips.

Some years ago I ventured on a description which awarded the ideal ridgeback a black nose. This brought me a reprimand from the owner of a brown-nosed, near-champion ridgeback, one of the leading six in the country. The owner informed me that the pure-bred ridgeback should be a strong and active dog, capable

of great endurance with a fair amount of speed. The South African Police started training ridgebacks years ago, and it is possible that this breed may replace the Doberman as the finest dog on a scent. Ridgebacks will follow a spoor on the veld at fifteen miles an hour. They also make grand watchdogs.

The ridgeback has a fairly long head with flat skull and powerful muzzle. In colour, a short wheaten coat is preferred, fawn and brown are permissible and white points are allowed. A good show-dog must have a deep chest and strong legs.

Now glance at the ridgeback as it was in the mongrel days before shows. Dogs were leaping on the beach when the Portuguese explorers stepped on to South African soil, and there must have been ridgebacks in the welcoming committee. You may remember Vasco da Gama's report: "The Hottentots of St. Helena Bay have numerous dogs which resemble those of Portugal and bark like them." Theal the historian, writing very early this century and many years before the ridgeback became fashionable, remarked: "The principal property of the Hottentots consisted of horned cattle and sheep ... The only other domestic animal was the dog. He was an ugly creature, his body being shaped like that of a jackal, *and the hair on his spine being turned forward;* but he was a faithful, serviceable animal of his kind."

It is estimated that the Hottentots migrated into Southern Africa during the fourteenth century, and there is little doubt that they brought the forerunners of the ridgebacks with them. One might have expected a hunting people like the Bushmen to have possessed dogs. They arrived in the south centuries before the Hottentots, and dogs would have aided them enormously in their dangerous way of life. Cave men in many lands tamed the wolf and the fox, the jackal and coyote. It was one of mankind's great early discoveries, like

stone weapons and fire. They captured the puppies of wild members of the dog tribe and taught them to guard the human families, to scent danger and bring the wounded quarry to bay. There may have been unknown species of wild dog, now extinct, from which the tame dogs of the world are descended; or Darwin may have been right when he said that our dogs were originally wolves of various species. It is a fact that where you find savage hunters, the dogs bear a strong resemblance to the wild dog species of the territory. Even in civilised lands, the likeness often remains; the dogs of Egypt are obviously related to the wolves of Egypt; and many of the dogs of the surviving Bushmen in Southern Africa are clearly cousins of the black-backed jackal.

Yet I think it can be assumed that the Bushmen never succeeded in taming dogs, and that they secured their first dogs from the Hottentots. You find the bones of dogs in the oldest caves of Europe; and the cave painters of France and Spain depicted man's oldest friend in many a hunting scene. Bushman caves in South Africa, have yielded many queer relics; but strange to say, you do not find the remains of dogs (except in comparatively recent middens) or pictures of dogs.

So you have to go back to the Hottentot, the origin of the Hottentot, to discover the origin of the ridgeback. Scientists agree that the Hottentot has a lot of Bushman blood in him. It seems that a race of Hamites moved southwards from Egypt and mingled with the Bushmen they encountered in the neighbourhood of the Great Lakes. Thus a new race arose, with a click language like that of the Bushmen, yet retaining something of the old Hamitic structure. These people, the Hottentots, travelled on into the south with their cattle (known much later as Afrikander cattle), their sheep and their dogs. All these domestic animals were toughened by the long trek through the tropical bush to the

healthy lands of the south. The dog met every wild beast from the jackal to the lion, and those that survived were ideal hunting dogs.

No one will ever know where and when the ridgeback developed its ridge of hair. Egypt's most famous dog was the greyhound, and there is still a hint of the greyhound in the ridgeback. But there is not a scrap of evidence to suggest that any ridged species of dog had its origin in Egypt. The ridge characteristic may have arisen during the trek or after the Hottentot tribes had settled in South West Africa and South Africa.

Apparently the "Hottentot dog" (as the old ridgeback was called) aroused no interest among white people in South Africa until the middle of last century when the farmers round Swellendam developed a breed for hunting in the mountains. This was a cross between the *boerhond* (a mongrel, according to my Afrikaans dictionary) and the Hottentot dog, with a dash of Irish terrier blood. These dogs had square jaws and were noted for their courage. The breed is now extinct.

One of the pioneer missionaries to settle in what is now Rhodesia was the Rev. Charles Helm, who travelled up by wagon in 1875 from Swellendam. He had his wife and daughter (afterwards Mrs. Jessie Lovemore) with him. Mrs. Lovemore has stated that some well-wisher in the Swellendam district presented her father with a pair of ridgebacks. Helm's ridgebacks are regarded as the progenitors of the modern Rhodesian ridgebacks. Cornelis van Rooyen, the big game hunter and friend of Selous, borrowed the dogs from Helm and bred a pack for hunting. Van Rooyen had trekked into Matabeleland with his father. He became an ivory hunter at the age of fourteen, and killed eight elephants during his first season. "A pleasant, intelligent man who spoke good English," was a description of Van Rooyen which I found. "He was a

great admirer of Selous, though he himself was no mean hunter." Such was the man who founded the Rhodesian ridgeback breed.

For years the early ridgebacks were known as lion dogs, and a memorable sight it was to watch a fearless pack baying a lion and finally dashing in to kill the lord of the veld. Today, however, the lion dog is a separate breed, about the size of a large Alsatian, with a large "ruff" of hair like a lion's mane. The ridge seems to have diminished or disappeared in this breed.

Rhodesian pioneers found the ridgeback-lion dog extremely useful, and it is on record that a mining commissioner secured another pair from Ceres towards the end of last century. A peculiar story which is perfectly true also has a bearing on the Rhodesian breed. Mr. J. N. R. Labuschagne, a member of the Moodie trek of 1896, went down to Beira three years later and brought a large black dog called Voorman for twenty pounds on board a German ship. This somewhat mysterious dog had a ridge. Labuschagne then bought a red pointer bitch, and developed a ridgeback breed which became popular in the Chipinga district. For nearly three decades after that, however, the various ridgeback types in Rhodesia were looked upon as useful mongrels. It was not until the Salisbury dog show of 1927 that ridgebacks were exhibited as a distinct breed.

No wonder Rhodesians look upon their ridgebacks with pride, for they grew up out of pioneer conditions. These were the dogs they depended on to guard their camps, to keep hyenas and jackals and even lions away from their tents. Many a ridgeback was carried off by a leopard when it ventured too far from the camp fire; the great cats loved dog meat.

Ridgebacks pursued elephants, rhino, buffalo. The bravest dogs of other breeds flinched when they scented lion for the

first time. Ridgebacks stood their ground, held the lion at bay and drew its attention from their master.

So the brave ridgeback returned south of the Limpopo in a new, pure form, a standardised ridgeback about twenty-six inches in height, weighing up to seventy-five pounds. A club was formed in the Transvaal in 1945 to maintain the purity of the breed in the Union. More recently the ridgeback has ousted the collie, the cocker spaniel, the bulldog and other old South African favourites, and is holding its own easily as South Africa's typical and best loved dog. The rise of the ridgeback is all the more remarkable when you consider the fact that as recently as 1920, two specimens were exhibited in the Pretoria Zoo as curiosities.

Ridgebacks were first seen in England in 1928, when Mrs. Foljamb imported two specimens. They aroused great interest at the Kennel Club Show at the Crystal Palace. Ridgebacks are still rare at shows in England. Banshee, a four-month-old bitch, was presented to the Queen, and Princess Elizabeth received a dog puppy named Hoolie, during the 1947 Royal visit to Rhodesia. These were both magnificent specimens of the Rhodesian ridgeback breed, a perfect pair of dark wheaten colour.

Canadians have imported ridgebacks to hunt the cougar or "mountain lion". There are hundreds of ridgebacks in the United States; and in 1955 the ridgeback was admitted to the American Kennel Club stud book – the first new breed to be admitted in ten years and the one hundred and twelfth breed to be so honoured. Some dogs have taken thousands of years to reach the aristocracy. The ridgeback has come up to nobility within a few decades.

Meanwhile some authorities have said that the old Hottentot dog with the ridge is extinct. I doubt whether it has died out completely, for I saw more than one

specimen in 1936 at a Kalahari camp where a band of Bushmen had gathered. My old friend, the late Donald Bain, desert guide and hunter, pointed out these dogs to me. “Bushmen never sell their dogs,” Bain declared. “The ridgeback type owned by the Bushmen is becoming rare, and I think they are the finest hunting dogs in the world. They will catch a jackal within twenty yards. You will never hear them bark unless a lion comes too close to the camp. And when old people are left in the desert to die, according to Bushman custom, the dogs stay on and guard them to the end.”

Now to return to the ridged Phu Quoc on the other side of the world. What is this dog? I have seen only photographs of the Phu Quoc, for it is a rare dog and is said to be dying out. Marquis Barthelemy, who held a concession from the French Government for the island of Phu Quoc, once sent three of the dogs to the Paris Zoo; but dog fanciers in Britain and America read the first detailed accounts of the Phu Quoc shortly before World War II. Clifford Hubbard, author of authoritative works on dogs and their origin, then proclaimed the Phu Quoc as the ancestor of the ridgeback.

You might easily form the same impression. Captain R. D. S. Gwatkin, one of the leading South African authorities on the ridgeback, wrote in 1933 that the Phu Quoc with its long head, reddish eyes, erect ears, tawny coat with darker hair on the back, and drawn up belly, irresistibly recalled the jackal. On the other hand the forward turned-up hair on the spine was shared only by the Hottentot dog.

Gwatkin stated that certain dogs of the East were probably derived from the Egyptian jackal, the species which produced the chow, the edible dog of China, and other related breeds. The ridge, according to Gwatkin, emerged in one of these Eastern breeds. Gwatkin

argues that the Phu Quoc ridgeback must have been taken to South Africa, because the Easterners were navigators and the Hottentots were not. He quotes the slender evidence of a Malayan canoe washed up on the beach at Port Elizabeth as proof.

Other authorities have fallen into the same trap. Hubbard credits the Phoenicians with introducing the dog into Africa, and says that the journey must have been made by sea, or other ridgeback breeds would have been left along the overland line of march. Hubbard gives the bloodhound as another important ancestor of the ridgeback, as bloodhounds were sent to South Africa to follow runaway slaves.

I am unable to find a trace of evidence fixing the Phu Quoc as an ancient breed of dog. There is no reason why a lion dog should have originated on an island in the Gulf of Siam, and in fact it did not do so. Phoenicians probably did sail round Africa six hundred years before Christ, but no historian has found records of a Phoenician voyage to Siam and then to South Africa.

Arabs were carrying slaves in their dhows from East Africa to China a thousand years ago. It may have been an Arab navigator, or a Portuguese, or a Dutch skipper only a few centuries ago, who landed ridgeback dogs on Phu Quoc island. These dogs undoubtedly travelled from west to east. There was a huge reservoir of ridgebacks in Africa; but on the island, by all accounts, there were never very many. Dog experts who favour the Phu Quoc origin obviously never thought about it very much. They were not historians. They tried to make the tail wag the dog.

On the island, the ridgeback kept nearly all of its African characteristics. It must have mixed with the chow, for the Phu Quoc has a blackish tongue and sometimes a black roof to the mouth. Otherwise it is still the old African ridgeback,

with a purity which it could have maintained only in isolation.

Call him what you will, *rifrughond* or *pronkrug, leeuhond* or *saalrughond,* Hottentot dog or Rhodesian ridgeback. He is good tempered with children, graceful in movement, a “one-man” dog with as fine and faithful a character as any. The ridgeback is no oriental but a true South African.

And that mysterious ridge of hair bent forwards, the mark of the breed? That must be a legacy of the wild, birthplace of all the world’s dogs, but so long ago that the animal that bestowed it will never be traced now.



Chapter 6
GENEVIEVE IN THE JUNGLE

WHEN I was too young to foist myself on expeditions going to romantic places I formed the habit of watching the adventurers depart. Thus I stood in the rain outside the City Hall in Cape Town on August 29, 1913, an envious schoolboy staring at the weirdest motor contraption ever seen in the city.

Little did I realize that the shadow of death hung over Captain Raleigh Napier Kelsey, leader of that expedition. He was the first motorist to leave Cape Town for Cairo, and I always wanted to uncover the narrative of events along the way as the doomed man rode towards the final tragedy. No one made a book of it, though it was a far more hazardous effort than later exploits which are now regarded as epic journeys.

To satisfy my curiosity at last, I have followed the tracks of those almost forgotten pioneers. The late Mr. Napier Devitt, well known South African magistrate and author, was a cousin of Captain Kelsey, and he gave me generous help shortly before his death. Here and there I found other people who remembered the expedition. Finally the newspaper files, diaries and letters enabled me to piece the story together and learn poor Kelsey's secret.

I think most people enjoyed motoring far more in those days when lamps were lit with matches and it was regarded as a triumph on a cold morning when the handle started the engine. Some recapture the charm by running veteran and vintage cars. The first car I ever drove was an 1898 Benz. I was a schoolboy, and two friends had bought this relic from a scrapheap for fifteen shillings and transformed it into a panting monster capable of occasional short journeys. Never again have I felt the same pride at the wheel.

The car I was studying that day in 1913 was a great deal better than the Benz. She was a Scot, a Genevieve of the future London-Brighton rally; but she had been named Louise of Argyll by the Duchess of Argyll. Her horse-power was twenty-five to fifty, and even in those days she was equipped with front-wheel brakes. Made by the Argyll Company, she had a most peculiar body design. It was composed of two large khaki-painted steel shells which could be lifted off the car and bolted together end to end, forming a small pontoon. With this device, which would float a load of three tons, the motorists hoped to cross unbridged rivers. A high green tent, drawn over hoops, sheltered the members of the party and their heap of stores, while surplus kit was carried in a large trailer.

Experienced motorists in Cape Town shook their heads and declared that this lumbering power-driven wagon was bound to come to grief. The design was faulty, they said, and the load was too heavy. They were right, though the car went a great deal farther than most people imagined it would be possible for any car to go at that uncertain period of motoring.

Captain Kelsey was then a man of thirty-three, a regular army officer. He had served in the South African War and had always longed to see the veld again. His father was a wealthy man, and in various

other ways Captain Kelsey raised funds for this Cape to Cairo expedition. The Argyll firm presented him with the car, of a chassis type which was stated to have given excellent service under rough conditions in the Argentine. One huge ranch there had ordered thirty similar cars as a result of tests The makers claimed that the engine would continue to work under water, and drove it through part of Loch Lomond where the water was two and a half feet deep The wheels were forty inches in diameter, and spare wheels could be bolted to the main wheels to provide a broader tread in sand or mud.

Kelsey hoped to compile a scientific report on the whole route, including possible white settlement areas. Two members of the expedition, Mr. J. C. Pickersgill Cunliffe and Mr. J. M. Gilliland, were selected as trained observers for this purpose. Another young man, Count Cornegliano, was sent ahead to Northern Rhodesia to organise petrol supplies. There he appears to have gone hunting and faded out of the scene, for the meagre records of the ill-fated expedition do not mention him again. Mr. J. Scott-Brown was the photographer and cinematographer, an enterprising pioneer among newsreel-camera men. He had been in the Sudan, filming game, and had just come from the Balkan war. Finally there was Mr. Angus McAskill, really the most important member of the party, for he had been lent by the makers of the car and he was the only man who could drive and repair it.

McAskill drove into the grounds of Buckingham Palace shortly before the expedition left England, and Scott-Brown took his first pictures while King George V talked to the members and inspected the car. Kelsey and his party landed in Cape Town from the Balmoral Castle early in August 1913, but the car arrived by a later ship.

I have described 1913 as an uncertain period of motoring. It was still possible to open up new routes close to Cape Town, and during that year the sandy run to Cape Point was accomplished for the first time. Six years before Kelsey's expedition, however, Mr. Frank Connock had covered the wagon track from Durban to Johannesburg and on to Cape Town, fourteen hundred miles in a single-cylinder car of eight horse-power. A far more sensational journey of 1907 was that of Lieut. Graetz, a German, who set out from Dar-es-Salaam and arrived in Johannesburg sixteen months later. Graetz had to make his own bridges and cut a passage for his car through many a mile of bush. He had covered nearly four thousand miles, and he had hoped to cross Africa from German East to Swakopmund in German South West Africa; but for some reason he abandoned the venture in Johannesburg. Possibly his feat had encouraged Kelsey to attempt the more ambitious journey.

"Mind you, it is quite an erroneous idea that we are going to sit in a luxurious car at our ease looking at the scenery," Kelsey told the reporters in Cape Town. "Most of the time only one man will be in the car, and we shall probably take three or four hours on occasions to cover one mile. We shall walk through all the bad parts, for the car must be saved as much strain as possible. It is very heavy – almost too heavy, for when packed it weighs five tons."

Kelsey carried picks, shovels, jacks and tools to build light bridges over small streams. Three petrol tanks held a total of sixty gallons. The car had done ten miles to the gallon in England, but under South African conditions the car sometimes used a gallon every three miles. Some misguided technical expert had advised Kelsey to have a special back-axle fitted

without differential gear. This was the cause of many delays and much trouble.

Cape Town motorists inspected the Argyll and its equipment in Benjamin and Lawton's showroom. They climbed into the open body, seven feet long and curving inwards. Kelsey carried a gramophone of the old-fashioned horn type, and he played a record of a lamb bleating. This cunning device, he explained, would bring lions within range of the cine-camera.

Royal Automobile Club members entertained Kelsey and his companions to lunch at the Opera House restaurant, with Dr. Barnard Fuller in the chair. Mr. Harry Hands, Mayor of Cape Town, told the gathering that he was a motorist only by the indulgence of his friends. "They are the kindest and most decent people imaginable," Mr. Hands added. "They are always ready to sacrifice their own comfort and give someone a lift, and the time may come when I shall be a motorist myself."

Yes, those were pioneer days, but Kelsey assured the gathering that he would succeed. "I have extreme faith in the members of the expedition," Kelsey declared. "They are all determined to see the car through, and it is my firm opinion that if there was only one man left the car would reach Cairo. We know there are swamps and sandy deserts and unfriendly tribes ahead of us – yet the longer we remain in Cape Town the more we realize that the exploit is going to be easier than we anticipated when we left England."

Kelsey stated that the British Government was not financing the expedition, but it had given him letters which would help him in foreign colonies. "The expedition is being financed by its members and certain gentlemen in England have also contributed," he said. "Expenses are going to be heavy for native labour. This is more a matter of money than of pluck and

endurance. This is essentially a private venture, though national in a sense. People in England are ignorant of Northern Rhodesia and know nothing of German East Africa. We shall explore these territories and gather as much information as we can."

According to Kelsey's estimate, the journey from Cape Town to Cairo would take eight months. "I expect to reach Johannesburg in two or three days," he said. "The route in Rhodesia will be roughly that of the railway, but in Central Africa I intend to make wide deviations to visit districts as yet but little-known to white men – territories where no motor-car has ever been seen before."

So there was the tented car with its trailer outside the City Hall, ready for the road. Sir Frederic de Waal, Administrator of the Cape, presented a flag composed of the Turkish star and crescent at one end, the arms of the Cape Province at the other and the Union Jack in the centre. "All explorers are advance guards of civilisation," Sir Frederic told them. "You are the first ever to undertake this journey, and you will face great risks from lions and leopards and fever, but I am fairly sure that you will not exceed the speed limit."

The crowd laughed at the joke, but Sir Frederic had made an unintentional prophecy.

"We'll do our best," said Kelsey in reply.

Pickersgill Cunliffe then rode ahead on his Triumph motorcycle. He was the expedition's scout, and he filled that role until almost the end of the journey. Shortly before noon the crowd gave three cheers and the Argyll drove away. Mr. Reuben Goldberg accompanied Kelsey to pilot him as far as Maitland, and Mr. R. P. Fitzgerald and other members of the Royal Automobile Club followed as an escort.

I was deeply impressed by this ceremony. Now that I am following the expedition after more than forty years, however, I am discovering one anti-climax after another. It seems that Kelsey had covered only a couple of miles of the seven thousand mile route before the overheated radiator demanded attention. There was tyre trouble at Parow. Soon afterwards the radiator had to be repaired again, and late that night the explorers dropped thankfully into bed at the Kraaifontein hotel. Cunliffe meanwhile had reached Paarl, where he found a number of local motorists waiting to welcome the expedition. “I found the road very bumpy and hard to follow,” reported Cunliffe. And when Kelsey did not arrive, Cunliffe declared: “They must have lost their way in the forest.”

Next day the Argyll thundered into Paarl, and there she remained for several days while drastic alterations were made. Kelsey had realized that the engine simply could not pull the load. He sent the trailer, tents, blankets, spare parts and other equipment by rail to Broken Hill. A blacksmith cut down the steel body, so that the chassis was relieved of a weight of two tons.

No longer was it possible to use the steel shells, but it is doubtful whether such a pontoon would have carried the car. The radiator had to be sent back to Cape Town for repair. Kelsey and his men spent their days pleasantly climbing the mountain and visiting fruit farms.

I think that was part of the magic of old-time motoring. You were on a roulette wheel, and you never knew where it would stop; what places you would come to know much better than you expected; what people you would meet. Today a village is an unknown blur as you pass by on the national road at high speed. Motorists of old made friends.

Kelsey called at many karoo farms. Mrs. W. Wilkinson, who was at Brakfontein, fifty-seven miles from Beaufort West, told me how the roaring, steaming Argyll came up to their homestead. The expedition stayed there for the night, and the family agreed that Kelsey was a charming man. In the morning, relays of helpers carried gallon after gallon of boiling water for the radiator before McAskill could start the engine. Nevertheless the Argyll reached Beaufort West three days after leaving Paarl. All the twenty car owners in the Beaufort West district turned out to meet Kelsey, and photographs show the women wearing long dust-coats, veils and motor-bonnets.

Kelsey was welcomed to Kimberley by the deputy mayor on the City Hall steps. “Early difficulties inseparable from all great undertakings have been overcome,” Kelsey wrote to a friend. “Lessons learned in the hard school of experience have proved valuable. We have found the road from Cape Town rough, yet occasionally our speedometer has reached thirty-five miles an hour! Across the veld the road is just a track which wagons have taken for ages past. When it becomes too rough, or when the wheel-ruts become too deep, a wagon will strike a new course, other wagons follow and so a new track is made. To prevent the main roads being washed away, mounds as high as two feet are built at right angles across them, the object being to divert the water so that it will not flow along the ruts and create deep channels. The unwary motorist breaks springs if he comes upon one of these mounds at speed. All along they have been our great trouble. Continually slowing down and picking up speed again is a strain on the engine. A small, light car can go across the mounds diagonally, and then the shock is only slight. Our car is big and the track is usually narrow, so we have to go straight at them. The occupants

of the back seat are continually pounded about."

You may remember that Kelsey had given an estimate of two or three days for the run from Cape Town to Johannesburg. He took nearly twenty days, and one Rand newspaper commented: "Captain Kelsey seems to be inadequately prepared and informed and has but the faintest idea of the difficulties he will encounter. He will need £1,500 for native labour. The car is an unsuitable monster."

Kelsey replied that a light car would not carry the tools, spares and ammunition. Cinema film alone weighed one hundredweight. Food and petrol depots had been established at Bulawayo, Abercorn, Tabora, Kampala and Khartoum. Apart from those points he had no fixed idea of the route he would follow, and no reliable maps.

"Members of this expedition have placed their last penny in it," Kelsey stated. "We are all taking it very seriously and we mean to get through. At the end lectures will be given, illustrated with cinema pictures."

Ten days after leaving Johannesburg, Scott-Brown was cranking his camera while the Argyll drove past the statue of Rhodes in Bulawayo. They were making better time. Donkeys had hauled the car through the dry bed of the Limpopo. Two days were spent on the huge Liebig ranch, in the lion country north of the river. Then they had pressed on through the green bush country and the Matopos. They spent nine days in Bulawayo, railing cases of petrol ahead and preparing the car for the ordeal facing them. They knew it would be an ordeal, though not one of them could have imagined the hardships and problems of the next seven weeks.

I found a letter written by Cunliffe, the motor cyclist, from Wankie at the end of October. "We were warned in Bulawayo that we would have to fight our way to the

Victoria Falls," wrote Cunliffe. "No man can now persuade me that there is any worse country in Africa to travel over. For days we have not had any solid food. Our strength has failed. Sustained effort is now impossible."

That was years before the all-weather motor road, of course, but travellers had a choice of three routes from Bulawayo to the Victoria Falls. There was the old wagon road cut by the pioneers; a later route used by the mail coach, drawn by trotting oxen; and the railway route, which was shorter than the others but deep in sand.

Kelsey chose the pioneer route, an unhappy choice as it turned out. He engaged an elderly native named Hans as guide. On October 17 the expedition drove out of Bulawayo, more heavily loaded than usual. They knew there would be no help for them in the remote bush country, and so they had a miniature workshop and all the spares they could carry.

Often the pioneer road disappeared. There were stretches where it seemed to have been ploughed up, and then it would be hidden in the long grass. Clear tracks were sometimes misleading, and the motorists would find themselves at an isolated farm or railway siding. At every kraal Hans the guide made inquiries, for Kelsey was anxious to avoid sandy patches.

Every night they lit fires against lions, leopards and elephant. Kelsey tried to cut across country on a compass course, but it did not pay; the trees they had to cut down were high, whereas along the pioneer road there were only young trees to remove.

The Argyll car had a clearance of thirteen inches. This meant that the boulders which wagons had passed over easily had to be broken up before the car could proceed.

I was fortunate in securing a copy of Cunliffe's diary for this part of the journey. It reveals the struggle vividly.

"October 17. Redbank 20 miles.

"October 18. Covered 43 miles. Badly stuck in Gwaai River. Fourteen oxen failed to move us. Got out finally with our own block and tackle.

"October 19. Only 20 miles today. Tyre troubles. "October 20. Covered 24 miles.

"October 21. Four miles total. Shocking sand. Tree stumps bad. Tore tap out of bottom of main petrol tank. Luckily the leak was soon noticed, as passengers were walking.

"October 22. Covered 20 miles, nearly all in bottom gear, over broken-up vleis to Chalmer's farm.

"October 23. Good deal of sand but also some hard ground. Covered 27 miles. Car delayed by sticking in a deep, narrow donga.

"October 24. Sand heavy. Twelve miles.

"October 25. Heavy day's work. Sand and bush. Frequent halts to cut down trees. Twenty-two miles.

"October 26. Hopelessly buried in a narrow drift. No natives to help. No oxen. A desperate case. Finally the five of us, one with a strained back, got her out with iron peg and block and tackle. Ten miles.

"October 27. A bad start. At 4 a.m. as I lay in my blanket I heard a sound like a moth's wings by my left ear. Almost at once I discovered my mistake. A snake was moving across my chest close to my face. Not a move, not a sound until the danger had passed.

"This day was even harder work, for we were in mountainous country. Had to stop continually either to cut down trees, break boulders with sledgehammer, or else fill in badly washed-out places. All this in the heat of the day. Again stuck in a drift. About 4 p.m., having got through the last

big drift, we made sure that we should sleep the night on beds. Not so. Car proceeding along a native path bordered by tall grass when suddenly a wash-out was observed. Before the car could be stopped the front wheel had fallen in and the rear wheel only remained on solid ground by a few inches. It was two hours' work getting the car out.

"Next day, when we were sure of a good feed in Wankie, we found the steering affected and had to use the blow-lamp to bend the rod. McAskill was suffering from influenza and jaundice, and Kelsey had a bad back, so Gilliland and I did our best. We did the job and were mortified to find that we could not start the engine again until we had pulled the magneto to pieces. Then we had scarcely enough strength to get the engine going. How thankful we were to see Wankie."

They saw too much of Wankie, however, for they broke the back-axle there and it took four weeks to put the car in order. McAskill was in such poor health that Kelsey had to send him back to Cape Town by train. Fortunately there was a motor mechanic named Ewain Wilson at the Wankie coal mine, and he agreed to take McAskill's place. Wilson brought a bull terrier with him as watch-dog. Kelsey also took on a head boy and eight carriers at Wankie, to lighten the load on the car over heavy stretches.

It was the rainy season, the weather was threatening, and Kelsey had no tents with him; the tents had been railed to Broken Hill. There was no heavy rain, however, or the Kelsey expedition would have ended soon after leaving Bulawayo. (Eleven years later the Court-Treatt expedition entered this stretch in December. This was the only motor-car expedition ever to travel on its own wheels all the way from Cape Town to Cairo, but the section beyond Bulawayo almost broke their hearts. They spent four months digging their car out of the mud,

four months covering four hundred miles.) Kelsey was lucky in that respect.

Many natives along this route had never seen a motor-car before, and the arrival of the Argyll caused a commotion at every kraal. When they were hopelessly stuck in the sand Cunliffe would ride to the nearest farm and ask for a team of oxen. Kelsey often marched ahead with the carriers, shooting for the pot, feeding his natives on buck and mealie meal. The carriers jogged along with their loads at three miles an hour, barefooted as a rule, but using sandals over rough patches. It was more pleasant walking than riding in the car, for the mudguards had been taken off at Wankie and now the passengers were bombarded with clods of earth picked up by the front wheels.

Kelsey employed a Bushman guide (two shillings a day) on the last stretch, and this man earned his pay. He pointed the direction unerringly across vast plains where the grass was often fifteen feet high. Not a path, not a wagon spoor broke the vista of grass. Yet they reached each shallow river at the drift, the exact place for the crossing.

Cunliffe was “bushed” with his motor-bike on one occasion. When he failed to link up with the rest of the expedition that night, Kelsey and the others went out with lamps, rifles and the motor horn to make their presence known. The Bushman led them straight to the lost man.

Sixty miles from the Victoria Falls the expedition ran out of petrol. Kelsey sent his carriers for the petrol, however, and they completed the double journey in six days. The stranded car came to life again and arrived in Livingstone six weeks after leaving Wankie. The distance is seventy-five miles. No wonder a local newspaper remarked: “The ultimate arrival of the expedition at its destination is problematical unless time is no object.”

Soon after Kelsey entered Livingstone the rains set in. However, Kelsey was assured that the road ahead was hard and good, so he paid off his carriers. Once again he took the precaution of lightening the car as much as possible, sending forward to Broken Hill the spare parts he had carried from Bulawayo, and also much personal kit. In fact, when the car left Livingstone each man had the clothes he wore, a spare shirt, spare breeches, a pair of socks, a few handkerchiefs and a sponge-bag. “Truly a modest outfit to face the African rainy season,” remarked Gilliland.

Livingstone to the Kafue river, two hundred and seventy miles. They had covered nearly one hundred miles when one driving shaft broke. This was the old trouble, of course, due to the absence of a differential gear. Kelsey, an intelligent and determined leader, found a railway siding with a telegraph office, and cabled the makers of the Argyll car in Glasgow for a differential, to be forwarded to Broken Hill with all speed. There was a spare driving shaft at Broken Hill, but Kelsey knew he would never reach Cairo without a differential.

He pushed on, the engine driving one of the back wheels. They had to “corduroy” the track at times by cutting down saplings and placing them side by side to support the car over mud holes. Once they were stuck in a broad river with a rocky, uneven bed, and they emerged only after filling the uneven holes with stones. Nevertheless, they found pleasure in the country. Gilliland wrote: “This stage is by far the most fascinating of the whole tour. For days our route has lain through the limitless African jungle, with mile after mile of the same palms, the same thorn bushes. True, there were occasional stretches of grassland, but they were never extensive and you could always see they were hemmed in by the bush.”

At last they came to where the meadowland opened out, undulating

country stretching to the horizon. The trees were noble, and at Kafue there was the mighty river. White farmers gave them butter and eggs, milk and bread, tomatoes, lemons and bananas. It was Christmas Eve, 1913, and it must have seemed a long four months since they had left Cape Town.

Sundown on Christmas Eve. They pitched their camp on the river bank, but the Kafue people heard they were there and brought them in to dinner at the hotel. They slept on proper beds at the Farmers' Club that night. Kafue hospitality kept them there until December 31, when they took the battered car over the railway bridge and covered the thirty-six miles to Lusaka easily.

Lusaka is now the capital of Northern Rhodesia. In 1913 it was merely a farming settlement, populated by hardy Afrikaners. The town consisted of the railway station, hotel, police camp, three stores, a butcher's shop and a bakery. The farmers were all in town that night, celebrating New Year's Eve at the hotel, sending off rockets and firing their rifles like true frontiersmen.

Among the police at Lusaka' was a young trooper named Sillitoe. Long afterwards he wrote his reminiscences and mentioned the car which "stormed into our little town". Sillitoe said it was a splendid excuse for a celebration, and drank the King's health at midnight with the motorists. "It was as well for our good spirits that we had no premonition of the disastrous end," wrote Sillitoe. You will find his memories of the expedition in his book, "Cloak Without Dagger", by Sir Percy Sillitoe, former chief of the British Secret Service Organisation.

Next day they pushed on to Broken Hill, eating tinned cod and plum-pudding. All of them understood that they would be leaving all hope of outside mechanical help behind, once they had left the railway line. But they had ample time to plan the

next stage of the journey, for the car was delayed at Broken Hill from early in January 1914 until April 18 that year. Kelsey, you will remember, had cabled Glasgow for a new back-axle with differential. The outfit reached Broken Hill on March 22, and the new mechanic Wilson was able to fit the parts in place of the old shafts.

"The car is now running excellently and steering better," Wilson reported to the factory. "We have dispensed with the large, heavy, acetylene headlamps and generator as running at night is impossible. Captain Kelsey has gone ahead with native carriers, taking petrol and stores. Mr. Gilliland is with me, but I am in charge of motoring arrangements until the car party catches up with Captain Kelsey. Roads are non-existent in this part of the country, and no car can carry a load heavier than five hundred pounds, including the driver. Rain has been falling continuously since we have been at Broken Hill, and travelling has been impossible. Now the rains have broken. The next stretch of more than five hundred miles consists of elephant grass twelve to twenty feet high, with rivers to be crossed on rafts of poles lashed to native dug-outs."

Kelsey had gone forward along what is now known as the Great North Road, the bumpy road of white dust that runs from Broken Hill to Abercorn at the southern end of Lake Tanganyika. In those days there was only a native path, traversed by wagons and bicycles. Kelsey rode a bicycle. Scott-Brown had marched off on foot in a north-easterly direction to film big-game, and Kelsey expected to meet him. Cunliffe, the motor-cyclist, does not appear in the final records of the expedition. Evidently he packed up and returned home during the long delay at Broken Hill.

Living was cheap in the wilds before World War I. The records show that

Kelsey was paying his carriers three shillings a month. Natives in the villages of thatched huts along the trail would give you two eggs in exchange for a needle, or a fowl for two pence.

Kelsey pitched a camp eight miles from Chitambo mission, close to the spot where David Livingstone died. On Easter Sunday (April 12) a leopard entered his camp. Here is Kelsey's own description of the encounter, written from the Chitambo mission a few days later to Mr. W. G. Rushbrook, headmaster of Kelsey's old school, St. Olave's, Southwark: "There are few people I can write to as I am gradually leaving my senses. Last Sunday, Easter Sunday, I wounded a leopard eight miles out of here in my camp. I followed it up and we met again. My magazine jammed and the leopard did good damage to my rifle. Then we had a hand to hand fight and I could only keep him on the ground by thrusting my hand in its mouth while with my right hand I readjusted the jammed magazine and shot him. If the mission had not been there I should never have written any letter and even now there is a possibility of poisoning. So although I always mean to get through it is a small chance. I left school in 1897. I have to stop every now and then as I go off in a faint."

Wilson and Gilliland were chugging through the bush in the Argyll, seventy miles from Chitambo, when a messenger suddenly appeared in their path holding up an envelope in a forked stick. There were two messages, one from Kelsey, the other from the Rev. Malcolm Moffat, the missionary, begging them to drive the car to the mission as fast as possible.

The car was moving forward almost at walking pace, accompanied by a number of natives who pushed it through difficult patches. It was really quicker to walk, and Gilliland marched on ahead with a few carriers to reach Kelsey's bedside. He found Kelsey receiving attention from

Mrs. Moffat, a trained nurse. Kelsey could not move, however, and there was no doctor. The only doctor in the district was too ill to attend to patients.

It was decided that Kelsey would have to be carried by relays of natives on a machila, a litter with a canopy. So on May 16 they started on a journey of more than one hundred and fifty miles to Kashitu, the nearest railway station. From there they hoped to take Kelsey by train to the Broken Hill hospital.

They met the car on the road, but decided that Kelsey would be more comfortable on the litter. However, the jolting caused great pain, and Nelsey grew weaker and weaker. Kelsey's left knee and thigh were hideously lacerated. One thumb was dislocated, but the hand had been mauled so severely that the dislocation could not be reduced.

There was a doctor at Chiwefwe some miles ahead, a Dr. Stohr who had become a cattle farmer. So the car was sent ahead of the slow column to warn the doctor that a patient would be arriving in a desperate state. Kelsey's wounds had become septic, and surgery was essential.

Dr. Stohr gave the anaesthetic himself and was incising the terrible wounds when Kelsey died. He was buried next day (May 27) at a spot one hundred and ten miles east of Kashitu, three-quarters of a mile off the road.

"Such is the tragic end of the Cape to Cairo expedition," Gilliland wrote. "It was all so unnecessary. Kelsey wounded the leopard, which retreated into the long grass. The boys warned Kelsey not to go after him. Kelsey misunderstood them and thought they meant the leopard was dead. While the leopard was mauling Kelsey an unarmed boy seized the leopard by the hind-legs and dragged it off him. Kelsey reloaded and killed the leopard. The boy was uninjured."

Gilliland added that he still thought it would be possible to reach Cairo in the Argyll car. The engine had never given any trouble. However the car was abandoned in the bush at Kashitu, a rusting monument to a forgotten but mighty effort. Kelsey had led his party for more than two thousand miles from Cape Town, over the hard karoo, through tropical bush and jungle. He deserves to rank with the later African pioneers, and I think Gilliland was right when he said that the Argyll was capable of reaching Cairo.

Gilliland returned to Cape Town by train, but Scott-Brown went on alone, up the trail Kelsey would have followed had he lived. For a time Scott-Brown stayed on a farm owned by Mr. G. H. Morton near Abercorn. “With his primitive and cumbersome apparatus he took moving pictures of dangerous game of many species,” Mr. Morton told me. “Alas! He went on to German East Africa and fell into the hands of the enemy when war broke out in August 1914. I learned that he was interned, but never heard of him again after the war. Presumably his films of the Kelsey expedition and the big game were lost.”

Morton had one brighter memory of the expedition. A number of British food manufacturers had supplied Kelsey with samples of their wares for publicity purposes. When the party broke up, Scott-Brown took cases of delicacies with him, rare foods such as Morton had never seen before in the bush. “The turtle soup was good, but the canned mutton was even better,” he recalled.

As I said in the beginning, Kelsey had a secret. His struggle was not only against Africa. He set out full of the spirit of adventure, but without enough money. There came a time when Kelsey could no longer appeal to his father. It was doubtful whether the expedition would have got beyond Kimberley if De Beers had not given him one hundred pounds to help

him on his way. Kelsey wrote to a number of leading British manufacturers, offering to give publicity to their goods, and some of them responded. He was almost penniless in Wankie, but the generous coal-miners raised a subscription which gave new life to the expedition. Gilliland, Scott-Brown and Cunliffe paid their own expenses.

Kelsey always had the nagging worry of the driver's wages, the native carriers and the upkeep of the car on his mind. Money troubles and long delays caused a great deal of quarrelling, too, for expeditions are seldom as harmonious as they may appear on the surface. Kelsey was a brave and resolute man, and his companions lost a fine leader when he went to his lonely grave in the Northern Rhodesian bush.



Chapter 7
PENNILESS WANDERERS

FIFTEEN YEARS before Genevieve, the Argyll car, plunged into the jungle, a young man named Ewart Grogan set out from Cape Town for Cairo. He used every form of transport known in Africa last century, mainly his own feet. On the lakes he found canoes and dhows. He rode horses and mules, and sometimes he used ox-wagons. In the Nile swamps he crawled on his stomach.

Grogan reached Cairo two and a half years after leaving Cape Town. He was the first of the Cape to Cairo travellers. “I must say I envy you for you have done that which has been for centuries the ambition of every explorer,” Cecil John Rhodes wrote to him.

Grogan had money, but he needed courage, too, in those days when Darkest Africa was still a reality. After him have come all sorts of people with and without money, travelling hard and travelling soft. The penniless wanderers have always appealed to me, and in a Cape Town newspaper office I was bound to meet many of them. I listened to their stories, and I tried to learn their secrets.

My typical penniless wanderer has a faraway look in his eyes, his clothes are light and strong and he wears massive boots. Always he is ready, like a conjurer,

to produce a fat and fascinating book containing hundreds of signatures and rubber-stamps, a book revealing place-names such as Wadi Halfa and Abercorn. Even without the fifty pound pack on his back, you have no difficulty in recognizing him. He is the man who has walked through Africa.

Year after year these determined travellers arrive in Cape Town. They are not always young, and nowadays many of them will admit that they prefer riding to walking. Some have bicycles, or motor bicycles, scooters or even cars. They are seeing Africa, for next to nothing.

The familiar tourist routes from Cairo to Cape Town mean nothing to these penniless wanderers. They have no elaborate schedules, no baggage worth mentioning, certainly no books of travellers' cheques. But there is a healthy, confident look about them. They have been bold enough to tackle difficult tasks without fearing hunger or friendless poverty in distant lands. One man in a thousand, perhaps, will give up security to embark on such an enterprise. I have met the courageous spirits who have done it.

One was a young Canadian who had covered eight thousand miles in Africa in five months at negligible cost. He did not pretend to have walked. "It is impossible to walk from Cairo to Cape Town," he declared. "Anyone who tried would die in the desert." He told me some of the secrets of travelling on next-to-nothing. "Never admit you can't do a job," he said. "I accept every piece of work offered. If I fail – well, I get fired and move on. But more often I find the job is not so hard after all."

This man made the long journey by river steamer down the Nile. A deck passage cost him one-fourteenth of the price of a first-class ticket. In native territories he found that ample food could be purchased for a few pence a day. On his back he carried a satchel with his eiderdown

sleeping-bag, change of clothing and medical kit. “Every white man is regarded as a doctor by the natives in some parts of Africa,” he said. “I was entertained royally by many a village headman after I had dispensed a few simple remedies.”

Missionaries were hospitable, too. He worked for his keep at a number of stations, and then moved on as a passenger in the mission motor-lorry. Indian traders helped to transport him from place to place. “Give me the lonely roads where only one car passes every day – then you are sure of a lift,” he said. “On the busy routes, every car ignores the hitch-hiker.”

A packet of salt is the best form of currency in the Congo villages. He would give the eager headman a little salt and receive chickens and fruit in exchange. When I met him he had travelled twenty-three thousand miles since leaving Canada. Having seen all Europe, Asia Minor and Africa, he was bound for India. There was no doubt in his mind that he would complete his journey round the world.

I knew an ingenious American, neither penniless nor rich, who saw Africa free as a result of a stroke of luck. He was on board a Congo river steamer at a time when navigation was liable to be delayed by the papyrus grass. Huge islands of this grass blocked the narrow waterway and made progress impossible. The passengers were informed that the ship could not proceed for a fortnight. Someone suggested elephant hunting as a means of passing the time. My friend joined the hunting party, brought down two elephants, and sold the tusks to a Greek trader for a sum that paid all his expenses through the continent. “Though I don’t mind admitting that it took fifteen shots to drop the first elephant,’’ he told me.

A honeymoon couple motored through Africa between the wars at a total cost of thirty shillings a week. They carried

nothing more deadly than an old kitchen knife. The tiny car became a double bed at night, and nothing ever attacked them. The young husband lectured at dozens of schools throughout the journey to cover expenses.

A party of German minstrels spent more than two years on the road in Africa, lecturing, playing and singing for their meals and petrol. Their motor-truck covered fifty thousand miles and took them from Cape Town as far north as the Sudan, zig-zagging across Africa four times.

Firearms mean trouble at every frontier, so the tropical tramps seldom carry even an automatic pistol. Many of them emphasise the fact that they have had no dangerous encounters with wild animals. But there have been tragedies. Darling, a traveller on foot, was mauled by a leopard in Portuguese East Africa and one of his companions was killed. James Scott, a roving Scot who finished his walk from London to Cape Town in 1937, told me that he had been "treed" by lions twice, but never touched. He suffered great pain from a scorpion bite, however, and he was worried by rats while he slept.

Scott was a genuine walker, striding along with the fifty-pound pack that all the experienced men carry, often living on dates and water. At other times he found that tea, sugar, and beef suet were the best foods. His was a remarkable achievement for a man of fifty. He wore out twenty-two pairs of boots during the journey of fifteen thousand miles. In Nairobi he met Grogan and compared notes. I asked him whether he ever felt lonely during the long march. "Lonely? Only in civilisation," Scott replied. "There's too much to see in the desert and the jungle to be lonely."

The cyclists, of course, are able to cover the ground at a much greater pace, and carry more gear. Douglas Carr, a Canadian, rode down Africa in seven

months, sometimes pedalling seventy miles a day.

The fat books I have mentioned as part of every penniless traveller's kit are carried to show that the owner is indeed a member of a race apart and no ordinary hobo. These books, signed and stamped by mayors, postmasters and police, prove that the traveller is following a definite route. If he is walking round the world to win an enormous wager, here is the evidence. The book, I imagine, leads to many a welcome offer of hospitality, a meal and a bed for a tale of adventure, fair exchange indeed.

A Scottish traveller, of course, will seek brother Scots wherever he goes; the Germans will be hailed by fellow-countrymen; Greek wanderer will find Greek trader, even in the Congo forests. (A one-legged Greek limped right through Africa on a crutch some time ago.) Failing private accommodation, there is usually a spare bed in the police station for a decent traveller on foot. But in tropical Africa every white man passing through an outpost is treated as a guest. There is seldom any danger of going hungry and without shelter. The prospect of a new face at the table is welcomed.

Many of these travellers carry postcard-portraits of themselves, which they sell. They all tell you they are collecting material for books, but few seem to achieve publication. It must be heart-breaking for these amateur writers to discover that there is no market for the stories of the hardships that were so real to them. Or perhaps they never write their books, after all. Perhaps they are still wandering in distant countries, heading for the horizon on journeys that never end. I have still to meet one such traveller who is ready to declare that the long tramp has ended. He is always moving on to a new land.

Some men make religious pilgrimages through Africa. "I come with a message

from your best and oldest friend," says this traveller as the door opens. He then sells an illustrated edition of the Bible and passes on. I remember one expedition which travelled in a caravan painted to resemble an armoured car. The members called themselves an "international peace mission". They charged a small fee for inspection of the caravan, sold pamphlets, and saw a fair stretch of Africa at the expense of the inhabitants.

One lucky man was engaged in Cape Town by a wealthy American who wanted to drive to Nairobi. On arrival there the American presented the car to the driver and paid his expenses back to Cape Town. Such chances of seeing Africa for nothing seldom occur.

There was a period after World War II when even the boldest wanderer refrained from setting out into Africa with empty pockets. But it started again, and the post-war travellers I encountered were no less enterprising than the old hands I had known. A man who impressed me was a twenty-eight-year-old Scot, R. Macduff Urquhart, B.A., LL.B., graduate of Oxford and Edinburgh Universities, who had been a major in the Seaforths during the war. Urquhart assured me that he was not merely fond of travel; he had an unquenchable thirst for it. He had crossed Canada wearing a kilt from the Atlantic to the Pacific on five pounds. (Canadian Scots looked after him.) He knew the Far East and Western Europe. And in 1951, when the winds of Edinburgh grew cold, he left home with a rucksack, one blanket, a little money, and the addresses of three friends in Africa.

Urquhart had landed at Casablanca and then travelled fourth class by sea to French West Africa. "Pretty rough – usually reserved for native troops," he recalled. "But I spread my blanket on deck, slept happily under the stars, and enjoyed a free bottle of wine at every meal. The bread was good, too, and

sometimes when I went to the galley for my rations the chef gave me a small patisserie he had made for the first-class passengers."

At times Urquhart had to pay his way by 'bus and river steamer. He hitch-hiked through the Congo forests successfully and reached Nairobi. There one of his friends persuaded him to become a schoolmaster. He had never given a lesson in his life, but the regular master was ill and so he accepted the post for six weeks. "It was a desperate struggle, but it filled my purse," Urquhart declared.

This resourceful traveller sailed to Zanzibar by dhow, spent eighteen pounds on a flight to Nyasaland, and thumbed his way onwards to Cape Town. He had seen Africa almost from end to end at a fraction of the price most tourists pay. "On the journey like mine you must be prepared to go anywhere, sleep in any place and eat practically anything," summed up Urquhart.

Such is the spirit that conquers distance in Africa, and I admire the determination of this restless legion. They add nothing to maps or science; but they have no regrets for the way they have chosen, and they do bring the breath of adventure to many a door in the far places.

Natives are naturally the greatest of all Africa's penniless wanderers. In the "Copper Belt" of Northern Rhodesia I met a Nigerian native trader who had walked there from the walled city of Kano, a distance of more than two thousand miles, with his merchandise. He had come by those narrow trails which form a network over Africa; footpaths leading from village to village, stamped out by bare feet many centuries ago and followed ever since. You can cross the continent from Loanda to Dar-es-Salaam keeping always to these tracks, sure that you are taking the easiest possible route. But there is no room for a motor-car on these unmapped tracks of Africa.

The main routes of today, where railways stretch up to the highlands from the sea, are the slave and ivory caravan roads of yesterday. Such a one is the Arab highway leading north-west from Mombasa to the Congo and beyond. The present Lobito Bay railway tracks are laid over the bones of thousands of slaves. And farther north, still bearing an old-fashioned cavalcade, is the Lake Chad trail that begins on the West Coast and ends on the shores of the Red Sea.

On the narrow paths bicycles are seen, with here and there a swaying camel. But in the land of the tsetse fly, where pack animals cannot live, the foot safari remains the greatest cavalcade of all and the native porter with his head load is still the most reliable carrier.

Such journeys may be made in greater luxury than the newcomer to Africa might imagine. You can have drinks off the ice, hot baths, a seven-course dinner and a comfortable bed under a mosquito net. The equipment is split up into regulation fifty lb. head loads, and it is merely a matter of taking a sufficient number of porters. Years ago the load was seventy-five lbs., and the porter cheerfully carried the additional weight of a rifle and ammunition, presents for his wife, food and water-bottle, brass wire and beads for use as money. The *kilangozi* (head porter) set an example by choosing the largest tusk, and the whole safari swung down the trail to the songs he started.

“Tsokoli-i-i-tsokoli
“Yo-o-oo.”

Are we downhearted? No. That is about the best translation.

The Swahili porter has helped to make history in Africa, and no great enterprise in the tropics has been completed without his aid. He carried the first steamers in sections to the Great Lakes, and guided all the explorers to the unknown hinterland.

On the pay-sheets, porters appear under such names as Kiboko (hippo), Risasi (cartridge) or Piga Mzinga (fire the cannon), simply as a matter of convenience. They are the strong men of Africa. It is by no means rare to see the head porter dance along for a mile at the end of the day to encourage his tired companions. Shoulder loads are moved in unison at the end of a song, a juggling feat; all along the line heads jerk aside, the load shifts over with a thump.

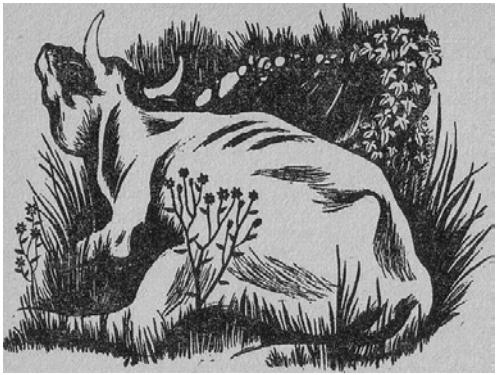
For four centuries the *machila* has been the white man's mode of travel along certain bush paths. Of course there are many white travellers and hunters who would scorn to use this queer contraption; they prefer to stride ahead of the safari with the gun-bearer close at hand. But when there are women in the party, or when a man falls ill, the *machila* will be there. In its simplest form, the *machila* is a canvas hammock slung on a bamboo pole and carried in turns by a team of ten or a dozen men. The most muscular fellows are chosen. They move out of step (or the motion would be intolerable) at a leisurely jog-trot. At the best of times it is a nerve-racking method of transport, often causing nausea.

Many attempts have been made to improve the *machila*, and there is now a type with one wheel, which reduces the discomfort. I have seen ornate *machilas* with leopard skin awnings, polished, brass-studded poles, and teams in uniform. But I have never seen one that tempted me. Even in the sweltering tropics it is better to walk.

The planning of a safari, of course, calls for experience. One young man left the purchase of food to his wife. Her mind was staggered by the quantities required for a trek of several months, so she made certain economies. They were almost starving when at last they reached a trader's store.

Pilfering is a prospect that cannot be ignored. One traveller, nearly a thousand miles from the coast and a long way from any source of supply, opened the box supposed to contain whisky. There were stones inside, carefully chosen to make up the correct weight. The remarks of another man who found curry powder in tins which should have held sugar are also unprintable.

Nevertheless, the safari is the finest way of all for those who seek contact with Old Africa. And no aero engine ever sang with such romantic rhythm as a winding, ebony cavalcade of porters tramping out into “the blue”.



Chapter 8
NO GREATER DISASTER

Ours is the meekness that endures; Our patience, like a steadfast tree, Stands in the torrent-pain that pours And sweeps all else to some dark sea. The patient bovine race unblest
Is earth's sad, dumb, pathetic guest.

– W. C. Scully. "The Prayer of the Cattle Smitten with Rinderpest."

NO GREATER disaster than the rinderpest ever smote Africa's animals. Even in native legend this plague stands alone. It crept down the continent like an evil shadow over the land, killing the game and cattle in its path by the million.

Among my earliest memories is a scene on the veld outside Kimberley, where I was born. Someone traced for me the tragedy of the oxen, still visible in the white bones of a whole team that must have been hauling a wagon; a team that lay down together and died, their bones picked clean by the vultures.

Long afterwards I was on a farm in the Prieska district, and I praised the fencing. The farmer smiled. "That was part of the rinderpest fence," he recalled. "The government put up a barbed wire fence – rushed it up I should say – for a thousand miles along the border of the colony south of the Orange River to keep the rinderpest out. It must have cost them a hundred pounds a mile. *Daar waai geen wind nie of dit is iemand van nut."*

The ill wind of rinderpest, however, did not enrich many people. If you made a list of the most serious causes of suffering in South Africa, the wars would come first, then the human plagues, with the rinderpest third. I have heard it argued that we are still feeling the sinister influence of the rinderpest because many white families have never recovered from the poverty which the rinderpest created. People suited to life on the land were forced into the towns; always an undesirable movement. And it is possible that South Africa would have more and better and cheaper meat today if the cattle-farmers had not lost their stock on a colossal scale sixty years ago. Rinderpest must have cost South Africa millions of pounds, the good old golden pounds.

What was this nightmare? Rinderpest is a German word meaning “cattle plague”; and the cattle-owning Huns brought the disease with them from the depths of Asia when they reached the present Germany during the Dark Ages. Rinderpest is a violent eruptive fever, highly contagious and fatal. Essentially a cattle disease, it also affects the ruminants among the game animals; and domestic animals such as sheep, goats and pigs may fall under the curse.

Rinderpest wiped out much of the German cattle a thousand years ago. It swept England in the early eighteenth century, and appeared in Africa for the first time over a hundred years ago. In the eighteen-nineties rinderpest started its deadly journey southwards. By that time millions of head of cattle had perished in Europe.

Egypt endured and survived the rinderpest, like all the other plagues. The infection which reached South Africa appears to have been brought to Massowah by Italian troops, and the Arab caravans spread it down the Nile.

Lord Lugard, the great African administrator, was a young army captain

in the Masai country when the rinderpest arrived in 1890, and he declared: “Never before in the memory of man or the voice of tradition have cattle died in such vast numbers. Never before have the wild game suffered so. Nearly all the buffalo and eland are gone. The giraffe has suffered, also many of the small animals, bush buck and reed buck. The pig (wart-hog) seem nearly all to have died.”

Here indeed was a killer more deadly than the white hunter with his rifle. Up to the time of the rinderpest the plains of East Africa were alive and black with the teeming herds of game. After the rinderpest the picture changed. There are still magnificent spectacles here and there, but the game you watch today is but a fraction of the life of the old African scene.

Elephants, hippo and rhino escaped completely. So did the lions and other meat-eaters. But the havoc among the ruminants was enormous, with the great buffalo in the lead. The disease transformed the buffalo from peace-loving creatures into raging monsters, as the terrified natives found to their cost. Rinderpest still breaks out at intervals in Tanganyika, and many unprovoked attacks by buffalo have been recorded. A buffalo infected with rinderpest will charge a motor-lorry or a railway train.

All the horned buck went down before the rinderpest; eland and kudu, bush buck and reed buck and duiker. For some reason which seemed to be connected with the digestive system, the sable and roan antelope, wildebeest and impala, were not among the heaviest casualties. Horses were immune, and it was hoped that the zebras would escape. This was falsified when Sir Alfred Sharpe found hundreds of dead zebra near Lake Tanganyika.

Veterinarians were surprised to find such large numbers of wart-hogs and bush pigs among the victims. No doubt they fed on the abundant carrion and paid the price.

Wart-hogs breed like rats, however, and they soon recovered. The mortality among the giant hogs of the East African mountain forests was more regrettable. These largest members of the pig tribe are rare (or at any rate hard to find) and the first living specimens only reached London twenty years ago.

One possible result of the rinderpest may have been the extinction of that famous mystery animal, the so-called “Nandi bear”. This brute has become as controversial as the Abominable Snowman. Hunters and naturalists who know East Africa intimately accept the native legend of a dark brown, shambling creature which hides in the trees and scalps passers-by. Stories of the “Nandi bear” are widespread and persistent; but as no specimen has been secured it is thought that the whole species has perished.

Slowly the rinderpest moved towards the south, with many freakish twists and turns. Panic-stricken buffalo carried it in some directions at the pace of their stampedes. They do so still in the smouldering reservoir of infection in East Africa. During the first attack, back in the eighteen-nineties, the left side of Lake Nyasa was devastated while all the country between the eastern side and the sea remained unscathed. Rinderpest was often checked and diverted by mountains. Lucky pockets of land were left untouched while in other areas the stunned natives lost nine out of every ten head of cattle. Rinderpest never entered the Barotse valley, yet the ruthless scourge reached out across Northern Rhodesia and withered the herds and the game of Angola.

Optimists in newly-settled Rhodesia thought the Zambesi would act as a barrier, but the river might never have been there. South of the river, early in 1896, the rinderpest travelled at the exact pace of the ox-wagons. The affected

districts never looked the same again, for the buffalo, the eland and the kudu had been thinned out so that the bush seemed empty.

Only when the disease reached Bulawayo was it diagnosed by the veterinarian Gray as rinderpest. The natural instinct of every transport driver was to hurry away from the menace; but oxen cannot be hurried, and the refugees only spread the disease. In a matter of days the rinderpest was in Palapye. Mafeking, five hundred miles south of Bulawayo, was smitten early in April. Rinderpest leapt the Limpopo as easily as the Zambesi, and then the Transvaal knew the horror of it.

My good friend Mr. Albert Jackson of Port Elizabeth was trekking down from the Kalahari by wagon to the North West Cape in 1896 when he was stopped by the authorities at Upington. Owing to the rinderpest, no cattle were allowed to cross the Orange River. “The whole river was guarded by Cape police patrols, and I remember them dipping my boots in disinfectant,” Mr. Jackson recalled.

Mr. Jackson described the border fence which I mentioned earlier. He was responsible for putting up forty miles of this fence, with a heavy fine if he fell behind time. “I finished my section in a month, but only by giving forty farmers one mile each,” Mr. Jackson explained. “The government supplied the wire, and we were allowed to cut down trees along the river for poles. My particular area was so stony that I had to use fifty cases of dynamite for blasting the holes. Unfortunately the fence was a sheer waste of money. Hawks and other birds of prey feasted on the thousands of rinderpest victims and carried the disease into the Cape Colony.”

I think the saddest tale of the rinderpest I ever heard was of a young farmer who became a transport driver on the route from Durban to the Transvaal. Before his first trip he married a Durban girl, and

they set out together in high spirits. All his oxen died of rinderpest on a lonely stretch. The husband tried to buy a team in the neighbourhood, but failed. He then decided to ride on horseback to his father's farm to borrow oxen. It was an awkward predicament, for his wife was a town-bred girl, and he disliked the idea of leaving her alone. However, there was nothing else to be done, and he rode away.

An hour later the husband returned. He had dismounted to drink at a stream, and a snake had bitten him. There was no hope. In his distress he had made for the wagon, and he died in his wife's arms. She was found soon afterwards with her dead husband's head in her lap, dazed by the tragedy. The men who stopped at the wagon buried the husband and took the widow back to Durban.

All along the transport routes of Southern Africa lay the abandoned wagons. A man who travelled from Mafeking to Bulawayo in 1896 told me that he saw wagons with loads untouched, others pilfered by natives. It was a scene of confusion. At every trading station the stores had piled up, surrounded by wagons that had reached those points and could go no farther. Not only was there the rinderpest as a cause of deep anxiety, but the Matabele were expected to rise at any moment. That was the situation which Baden-Powell had to deal with in the Matabele campaign.

Mafeking was crowded with troops, but the rinderpest had stopped all operations. The revolt was caused by the order that native cattle were to be killed to prevent the disease spreading. Natives who had not been aggressive were now inclined to join the rebels. Thanks to the rinderpest, it took an army of five thousand white men eight months to subdue the Matabele.

By now the fear of rinderpest had gripped the whole of Southern Africa, the Portuguese in the east and west, the Germans in Damaraland. No territory

escaped. Dead cattle lay reeking from sea to sea.

Veterinary experts and officials from the British colonies and the republics met at Vryburg in April 1896 to work out a policy which might save something from the wreck of South Africa's cattle industry. Among those who attended the conference was a young and unknown Swiss veterinarian named Theiler, later Sir Arnold Theiler. At the end of his brilliant career, this scientist who founded Onderstepoort declared that the rinderpest gave him more worry than any other problem he had encountered in his profession. In the Transvaal there were not enough police and hardly any scientists. Theiler did not make his name at this period. He was inexperienced, his salary was £500 a year, and when he went to Bulawayo and Vryburg he was handicapped by a poor knowledge of English. But the rinderpest taught Theiler how to wage a great campaign. For twenty months he drafted regulations, carried out research, organised meetings, wrote reports. Always he had President Kruger behind him. The drastic measures included a complete ban on the entry of cattle into the Transvaal from infected areas, and all transport by oxen had to be stopped.

Transvaal farmers had to keep their cattle at least three miles from the border. All stock suspected of rinderpest contagion had to be impounded, and much of it was destroyed. Fodder which might have conveyed rinderpest was buried or burnt. Dogs and pigs were destroyed wherever the rinderpest appeared. Meat wagons had to be drawn by horses or mules. Milk vanished from the shops. Game laws protecting buffalo, eland, giraffe, wildebeest, kudu and many other buck were suspended, and there was hunting on a great and tragic scale. After the shooting, and the rinderpest, the wild life of the Transvaal became a thing of the

past. Only in the game reserve which President Kruger established in the Sabi did the animals slowly recover from the slaughter and the sickness of the rinderpest.

At intervals President Kruger proclaimed a Day of Prayer. Despairing farmers dosed their cattle with raw linseed oil, and washed out the mouths of their animals with paraffin oil and salt. Tar was applied round the nostrils in the hope that it would act as an antiseptic. Yet the plague spread like a raging fire. A great celebration had been planned at Paardekraal on Dingaan's Day in 1896, and the Volksraad had voted £33,000 for the occasion. It was cancelled.

So great was the ruin that hundreds of farmers were unable to remain on the land. They converged on Johannesburg with their families seeking work. President Kruger laid out a new suburb for these "displaced persons", first known as Burgersdorp, now Vrededorp. Irrigation settlements and relief works had to be started to prevent starvation.

So many animals were destroyed that burial became a problem, and on many farms there was a labour shortage because the natives were digging graves. Wherever possible the doomed cattle were driven into dongas and shot; it was easier to fill in than to dig. But the work had to be done thoroughly or the jackals and other vermin pulled out the carcasses. Scully the poet and author, who was magistrate at Nqamakwe near Butterworth at the time, reported that over two-thirds of his district the dead cattle lay thick, and it was difficult to avoid the sight or the stench. Queen Victoria's jubilee could not be celebrated owing to the emergency. The natives were inclined to blame the government for their sufferings, and the territories from the Kei to Natal might easily have been plunged into war. It was rumoured among the natives that the government had brought this disease to

ruin them so that they would be forced to work in the gold mines. Scully worked so hard that his health was wrecked for a time, and at the end of the rinderpest campaign he had to go overseas to seek a cure for his insomnia. Many other conscientious officials drove themselves to breaking point.

The various governments compensated farmers when their cattle were shot to prevent the rinderpest spreading. Travellers coming south were examined at Norvalspont, and pet dogs were taken from them and shot. The newspapers recorded the trick played by a woman who asked the officials to allow her to wrap her dog in a cloak so that she could not see the killing. The officials agreed, and the woman took her dog into a waiting-room to say farewell. She emerged weeping with a bundle, the shots were fired and the bundle was buried. But when her train reached Cape Town she had recovered completely, for she had hidden the dog successfully and the bundle was a fake.

It was the Cape Government that urged Dr. Robert Koch, the greatest bacteriologist of his day, to come to South Africa and investigate the rinderpest. Koch was asked to name his own terms. Shortly before the end of 1896 Koch was at work in the burning summer heat of Kimberley, cutting up carcasses in one of the compounds. He tested all the local remedies, inoculated hundreds of animals, and finally confirmed something that many cattle farmers had already found out for themselves. “I consider it absolutely proved that by the injection of gall taken from rinderpest-infected animals, a sound animal may be protected against the disease, and that this discovery is also capable of practical application,” Koch reported.

Before the end of 1898 two million head of cattle had been inoculated and the disease was under control. The last cases

in the Cape were reported in 1903. Rinderpest has never reappeared, though as I have said, the disease still smoulders in tropical East Africa. All attempts to eliminate this reservoir have failed. However, Koch's method has been replaced by less dangerous and more effective injections of serum. All the territories menaced by rinderpest work in close cooperation. But even now the veterinary experts do not rule out the possibility of a major catastrophe in the Rhodesia's and the Union if the rinderpest breaks the cordon and moves south.

Today the railway line between Dar-es-Salaam and Lake Tanganyika is regarded as the southern limit beyond which the disease must be tackled vigorously wherever it appears. There has been no serious threat since 1939, when the rinderpest was driven back for three hundred miles north of the railway. A belt of immunized cattle is also maintained across Tanganyika. Game fences and trenches are additional precautions. The watch that is kept is so efficient that all the governments to the south will have timely warning if the rinderpest jumps the barrier.

What did the rinderpest of 1896-98 cost South Africa as a whole, the republics and the British colonies and protectorates? I said millions of sovereigns, and one estimate put it as high as £20,000,000. More than two and a half million head of cattle perished, according to Dr. M. W. Henning's estimate in his standard work on animal diseases. In the Cape Colony, the percentage of loss was thirty-five. Donkeys replaced oxen and saved the day – but at fancy prices. And if ever the rinderpest comes again you will not find the farmers selling their donkeys for slaughter at thirty shillings per hundred pounds dressed weight.

The good that came out of the rinderpest was the founding of Onderstepoort, the institute which is now world famous for

veterinary research. There the young Swiss genius named Theiler, who fought the rinderpest in vain, made his great discoveries and taught his pupils. If the rinderpest does come again, Onderstepoort will deal with it.

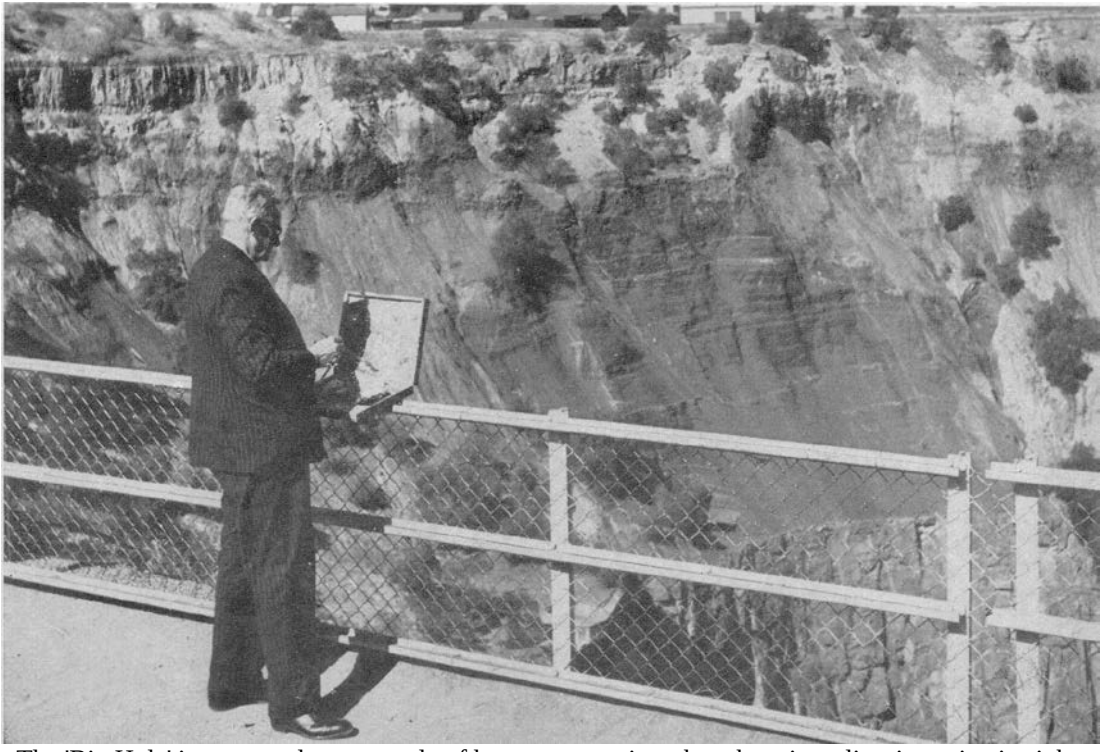


Chapter 9
RETURN TO KIMBERLEY

I AM in Kimberley again, the town where I was born, on the brink of scenes as rich and strange in their own way as anything in the world. If you can approach great wealth without envy, I will show you diamonds worth millions.

Kimberley can never hide its past, and here is the "Big Hole" again. My head for heights has not improved since I was a child; indeed, I am so acutely uncomfortable on the edge of this steep, gaping scar that I have to remind myself that Nelson was always seasick and that Napoleon dreaded cats. They say the fear of heights is due to the eye travelling downwards and measuring the drop, a giddy process. I have flown over this same "Big Hole" without the slightest feeling of nausea; but then the aircraft had become my world, there was nothing connecting me with the earth, and the impression conveyed to the brain was space, not height.

My fear of heights must have had its origin in that gigantic "Big Hole", for there were no other heights in Kimberley as far as I was concerned. Perhaps there are still a few people, over ninety they must be, who can remember when there was no hole at all. This was just a pock-marked area in the early seventies of last century, when the first diggers were working their claims. No one imagined that Cecil Rhodes would secure enough diamonds from this funnel to pay for the



The 'Big Hole' is a stupendous example of human enterprise when there is a glittering prixe in sight. From the observation post on the northern edge you see the rough circle, fifteen hundred feet in diameter.

occupation of Rhodesia. I stood there once with a later diamond magnate who had known it as a shallow pit in the midst of a town of canvas and tin. “Sometimes there would be a burst of cheering from the diggers,” he told me. “That usually meant a find. There was no jealousy, for one digger’s luck encouraged hundreds of others. Few women came to the diamond fields in those days, so every hat came off and the loudest cheers of all were heard when a white woman appeared on the rim of the crater.”

It was “New Rush” in those days, but as the series of pits went deeper they became the Kimberley Mine. Diamondiferous “blue ground” was hauled to the surface in buckets. Thousands of ropes were used, and in the moonlight the huge crater resembled it monstrous spider’s web. Landslides and rock falls hampered the work, but in course of time the area of the “Big Hole” at the surface was thirty-eight acres. Before the mine closed down in 1909, it had yielded diamonds worth £100,000,000. A shaft had then reached a working level of 3601 feet, which made it the deepest diamond mine in the world. Many thousands of people regard the “Big Hole” as the largest man-made excavation on earth, but this is a fallacy. I believe the Bingham Canyon copper mine near Salt Lake City, Utah, is a much larger open working.

Nevertheless, the “Big Hole” is a stupendous example of human enterprise when there is a glittering prize in sight. From the observation post on the northern edge you see the rough circle, fifteen hundred feet in diameter. It is very like a vast funnel, sloping down for nearly three hundred feet to the dizzy pathway (where you will never find me) round the rocky vertical pipe.

Such a dramatic scene has a sinister influence on some people. The “Big Hole” has known accidental deaths, suicides and rescues. All through the

years the bodies have been found; one man, with his jacket on inside out, appeared to have been murdered; another victim of the mine was a soldier in uniform. There was a queer rescue episode shortly after World War II, when a white man, wearing only a pair of shorts, was seen climbing the fence and descending the treacherous slope towards the vertical drop. A crowd soon gathered, and people shouted warnings and begged the man to return. But the man seemed intent on suicide. At any moment he might have gone rolling down the slope. It looked as though he was certain to fall into the pipe and drop to the water eight hundred feet below.

A coloured school teacher, Mr. G. F. Weber of Uitenhage, who had been serving in the Cape Corps, decided to see what he could do. Weber had never climbed inside the “Big Hole” before, but he went down bravely, taking great risks in the effort to reach the man in time. The man was within a few feet of the terrifying pipe when Weber approached him. Both of them were slipping on the steep gravel, and it seemed that both the would-be suicide and his rescuer would plunge to death together. They met and stopped on the very edge of eternity. Weber spoke to the man for some time; then the anxious crowd saw Weber returning alone. He had come to the surface for help, and a white man and a native constable joined him and all three went to the man in danger.

These three helped the man back. A short cliff had to be scaled near the top, and a dozen volunteers formed a human chain and brought rescuers and rescued to safety. There was a mysterious element in the affair which puzzled all who were present. How had Weber persuaded the man to remain where he was instead of committing suicide? Weber claimed that his success was due to hypnotism. He had studied hypnotism for seven years, he

said; and when he found himself facing a powerful man in that desperate predicament he realised that only by using hypnotism could he save the man's life.

Trees grow in the "Big Hole" today, masses of shale have fallen in, and the steep walls have become a bird sanctuary. I shudder when I think of it. A gloomy place. If it is not haunted it should be; haunted by the ghosts of '71 and after, adventurous spirits who hurried from the far corners of the world, toiled feverishly for a time and scattered again, some rich and some broken.

In my youth, and long afterwards, the diamond-bearing "blue ground" brought up from the Kimberley mines was spread out on "floors" for a year so that the weather might break up the rock. When I returned to Kimberley between the wars, however, I found a new system at work. The "blue ground" came to the surface and was tipped and fed slowly on to long conveyor belts. Lines of intelligent natives were picking by hand, leaving the rough "blue ground" with its glittering mica particles and taking off the smooth and useless rock. Hand picking is one of the most popular jobs on the mines. There is a reward for every diamond found by a De Beers employee; and although diamonds are seldom found until the final concentration, the chance is always present. A native convict labourer once handed in a stone of 268 carats.

Convicts are no longer employed on the Kimberley diamond mines. In the old days I was always amused to see incorrigible thieves in red-striped jerseys working so close to wealth in a form which might be regarded as exquisitely transportable. Even in the pulsator-house, where the diamonds come to light at last, the convicts were moving about happily amid the machinery. The convicts valued their tobacco rations far more highly than the diamonds under their noses. You could smoke the tobacco, but a diamond

was absolutely useless when there was no chance of smuggling it out.

I found it reassuring to note that the pulsator, most spectacular of the diamond recovery processes, had remained unchanged since my childhood. This is simply a table covered with grease and shaken steadily as the gravel washes over it with a stream of water. Diamonds are caught in the grease while the worthless gravel passes on. No one has ever really understood why the device makes this selection; not even the De Beers employee who invented it many years ago. But it works. Every two hours the tables are scraped clear of grease. The whole thick mess is placed in perforated cylinders and boiled. The grease floats out and the diamonds are left in the locked cylinders. A concentration of fourteen millions to one is complete. That is the ratio. It takes about seventy thousand tons of “blue ground” to produce diamonds weighing ten pounds.

When I was last in Kimberley they were using dogs to guard the “blue ground” lying out in the open and still containing a fortune in diamonds. Barbed wire entanglements enclosed this private treasure-house about a square mile in area. Fifty men patrolled the “blue ground” area in the old days, when the whole output of De Beers had to be exposed to the weather. The guard had been reduced to four men and packs of Alsatians and bullmastiffs.

All the most important places on the mines had their dog sentries at night; the pulsator house and the Kimberley offices. At each spot a dog was chained to a picket line about a hundred yards long. If this dog heard any suspicious sound it barked, and up came a “fighting dog”, that had been roaming the area free. Sometimes the dogs found a raider wearing knee and elbow pads, crawling over the ground in search of diamonds. If the man tried to escape the dog would hang on to his arm,

but it would never fly at his throat. These dogs were so well-trained that they would jump over burning fences, climb walls twelve feet high and obey whistles and other signals. Such was the routine that saved the mines many salaries and made the diamond “floors” in the open almost as secure as a bank safe.

When you drive northwards from Kimberley, all the way to Christiana, you see the river diggings. On the red veld beside the Vaal River stand the hovels of the diggers and the heaps of gravel, the sieves and the washing-machines. Here are true gamblers, men who expose themselves and their families to a life of hardship in the hope of sudden wealth. Some of them have sold farms to live in filth.

Yet I would be a hypocrite if I denied feeling the temptation of the river diggings myself. They put a scraper in my hand, and brought the gravel from the washer, and showed me how to sweep away the mass of garnets and moonstones, cats-eyes, carbon, agates and olivine and crystalloids. I went on flicking at the rubbish on the sorting-table until I found a glittering stone at last. In that moment I saw with startling clarity the whole charm of a life that does not even provide three meals a day for most of those who follow it. I wanted to take a partner who knew the game, buy the outfit and sort my own wash.

Failure seemed out of the question. That flick of the wrist would turn up a stone large enough to make me rich. After all, it has happened again and again. That is the curse of the river diggings – it can happen. Only when you think of the thousands who have lost everything does common sense prevail. The old river diggings are almost finished. It is a lamentable end to a romantic industry.

For the capitalist, however, the Vaal River still offers an even more exciting gamble than ever the small digger knew. I drove

out from Kimberley one day with Bernard Goldberg, the “diamond breakwater king” to see the greatest breakwater ever flung across the river. Goldberg has now been at this game for half a century. It was in September 1936 that Goldberg took me to the pool below Webster’s Koppie. Years ago Captain Webster discovered that the koppie was studded with diamonds. Hordes of diggers ransacked that hill, leaving it looking dishevelled and obviously holding nothing for posterity. But the pool called Webster’s Pool is a deep hole in the river bed, a treasure-chest guarded by water. When I arrived there, the pool was almost dry. Goldberg had spent twenty thousand pounds diverting the course of the river and draining the fabulous pool.

It had not been emptied without an effort. The breakwater was five hundred feet in length, and a side channel nearly a mile long had been blasted out of the rock. It had taken sixteen thousand shots of dynamite to blast that channel. The pressure on the wall was tremendous. If it had caved in, all the machinery would have been lost and the men would have been lucky if they had climbed out of the river bed before the water poured in on them. “It lends a spice to the game,” Goldberg told me cheerfully.

Swishing and grinding, twenty washing machines were sounding their merry song of diamonds. Boulders were being drilled, dynamited and torn out of the mud by cranes to open up “pockets” of diamonds. Natives were working knee-deep, waist-deep, shovelling away the over-burden, tracing the seam of rich gravel, loading the heavy iron buckets that went swinging up to the washing machines.

And there was I at the sorting table listening to the old hands at the game. “See these water-worn stones with hoops like a beer barrel round them – ‘bandoms’ we call them,” said a digger. “Well, when you get ‘bandoms’ you get diamonds, and

when you get ‘bandoms’ that size you expect something good.”

In fact, Goldberg and his partners did find something good in Webster’s Pool. In spite of the outlay of twenty thousand pounds, they showed a handsome profit. Years later, in 1948, they rebuilt the breakwater there; and again they took out diamonds worth thousands more than their investment before the rains came and swept the breakwater away. Goldberg is a magnificent gambler. He is also a licensed diamond buyer, and once he paid thirteen thousand pounds for a single stone.

I talked to another diamond buyer, the oldest of them all shortly before World War II. He was the late Mr. Maurice Aronson, who had held his license continuously since the ’eighties of last century. Once the street outside his Kimberley office was crowded with horses and carts and men dealing in shares and diamonds. Now the street is almost deserted, scores of diamond buyers have given up the game and departed, while those who remain carry hundreds instead of thousands of pounds in their bags.

“I once paid out nine thousand pounds in a day for river diamonds,” recalled Mr. Aronson. “And that was at a time when diamonds were comparatively cheap. My best deal was when I bought a stone and sold it the same day at a profit of three thousand pounds – a stone that another buyer had turned down. There was a much stronger element of chance then, for we were out of touch with the overseas market for weeks at a stretch. The cable and telegraph came later. If profits sometimes were large, there were times when you had to hold on to your stock for months to get the money back. Most of the diggers, then and now, have an excellent knowledge of the value of diamonds. But often a stone is speculative – a large white spotted stone, for example. I remember a stone found in the Hopetown district. The colour was so wonderful that

one buyer doubted whether it could be a diamond. I knew, paid fifteen hundred pounds for it, and sold for three thousand."

Mr. Aronson pondered for a moment over the glories of a lost paradise. "Then there was a woman working on the richest little patch of ground in the world at that time," he went on. "She offered me a diamond for seventy-five pounds. It was obviously worth more, and when I gave her a hundred pounds she was so grateful that she wanted me to take her daughter as part of the bargain!" He produced a little pocket-book full of large figures, "I will show you what the business is today," said he. "Here is a sum of six thousand pounds – bad debts written off because the diggers are dead or gone. Yet they are honourable men, always ready to pay when they have the money."

Diamond buyers were among the first people in South Africa to use motor-cars. Mr. Aronson had a De Dion in 1902. Before that he took nearly a week to drive round the diggings with a cart and four horses, a revolver within easy reach, and a bag containing twenty thousand pounds in cash and diamonds.

Here is the final Kimberley scene, the Central Sorting Office, a well-protected stone building to which all the large diamond producers of South Africa and South West Africa send their "parcels". Some years ago each company maintained its own staff of sorters and valuators. The Central Sorting Office has rationalised this important section of the industry, besides giving the sorters a wider experience of different types of diamonds.

In this room are youths learning one of the world's strangest occupations, and middle-aged experts who can tell the origin of a diamond at a glance, and what it is worth. They sit over the shining fortunes in a long row, men gripped by the spell of the diamond, the glamour that

never grows stale. White paper covers the work-table. Besides each sorter are the simple tools of the diamond trade.

“There are the sieves, the only mechanical things in the office,” pointed out my guide. “The diamonds come from a mine in a jumble, and the sieve helps to size them roughly. But after a few shakes the whole process must be done by balance, hand and eye.”

We passed into an air-tight weighing room to examine the scales. No draught must be allowed to interfere with an operation in which a weight of one-quarter of a carat may mean a difference of many pounds in the value of the diamond. There are one hundred and forty two and a half carats to the ounce. The largest scale will weigh a stone of twelve thousand carats, if such a stone is ever found.

Diamonds are cleaned with hydrofluoric acid. They need no other treatment until they reach the hands of the cutter. But what a shuffling and a series of classifications they must undergo before they are ready for shipment to London! I looked over the shoulders of the sorters. Each man had a pair of tweezers and a scoop; and sometimes a man would reach for the headgear of magnifying glasses to decide a difficult problem.

“It is all done by eye, instinct and experience – a human affair from start to finish,” went on my guide. “No machinery will ever replace these men. No textbook on the subject will ever be written. The job can be learnt only on the spot, by watching others, and I suppose this room is the finest training ground in the world. No other office handles such quantities and varieties of diamonds.”

He pointed to the youngest sorter. “We have to catch them young – every man in this room started learning the art at fifteen or sixteen. A man of twenty-five is much too old to begin. It is a matter of

temperament. You must handle diamonds constantly for fifteen years before you can call yourself an expert. Only then will you be able to distinguish diamonds from different mines and areas at sight. Monotonous work? Never. We find diamonds very interesting at all times. No two diamonds are exactly alike, and there is always something new cropping up to maintain the endless fascination of sorting. Opening a fresh day's output is like opening a newspaper. You never know what may be inside, and often the contents are startling. Of course, the eyes feel the strain, and so a working day of six and a half hours is arranged. Weighing and invoicing vary the routine and ease the strain. In dull weather nothing can be done – a dust storm or thunder storm stops all sorting immediately. In London, in the winter, sorting is a slow process. Here we seldom fall behind our schedule. Our windows, you observe, face south so that no sunshine may fall on the diamonds and dazzle the sorters. If the man opposite painted his roof white we should have to ask him to paint it again, a darker colour. Daylight is essential; a great deal of money has been spent on experiments with artificial light, but no substitute for daylight has been found satisfactory."

As I walked down the line of sorters I learnt that diamonds are now graded in much greater detail than ever before. A mine's monthly output may be sorted into a thousand or two thousand different lots – a task ten times more complicated than the old system of sorting. In one heap lay the pick of the output, magnificent blue-white diamonds of the finest shape and purity. Then there were heaps of colours and shades, almost imperceptible variations that affect prices enormously. I was shown a large stone with black flaws so pronounced as to render it almost valueless as jewellery.

Diamonds are found in all the colours of the rainbow, but red is the rarest.

Impurities in the crystal may give a diamond a red tinge and increase the price many times, an example of a fault being worth more than perfection. Green diamonds that cut green are valuable, too. The whole art of sorting and valuing diamonds lies in the power to visualise the appearance of the stone after cutting. Even the world's greatest experts are liable to errors of judgment in this matter.

After sizes, shapes and colours come the "cleavages", diamonds that have been broken in the earth; and "maacles", or twin stones. Among the stones that would look hideous when set in a brooch or ring are many that can be sold at high prices for industrial purposes. Precision machinery demands diamonds. New uses for the industrial diamond are being discovered every year. A stone that defies cutting will command a large price in the market where men buy diamonds for drilling and the manufacture of engines.

I pointed to a heap of hundreds of diamonds and tested the skill of the chief valuator. "Show me the finest diamond there, please." Instantly his hand went forward and he selected a brown octohedron. "There may be differences of opinion in valuation, but every man will agree that this stone is the best," he declared. And then he gave a further display of that mysterious sixth sense possessed by diamond experts. He glanced over a table of open tin boxes, each containing diamonds, and told me (without looking at the labels) the origin of each assortment.

"These are diamonds from Alexander Bay, the famous 'Aladdin's Cave' at the mouth of the Orange River, the Government treasure house that has yielded millions," he began. "Blue white, brown, yellow – all possess a typical brilliance; though they are not, as some have said, like cut diamonds. The absence of very low qualities may be noted. The next box

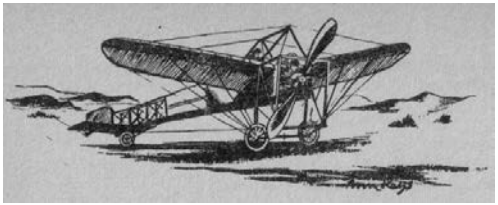
is from South West Africa. I cannot tell you why they differ from some of the other assortments, but I know in my own mind. Mines and diggings only a few miles apart produce stones that are totally different. Freaks do occur, and that is why a diamond expert in a court of law has an even harder task than a handwriting expert. But if I cannot always convince a judge and jury, I know in my own mind, just as a farmer knows his own sheep. Instinct cannot be explained, and we must leave it at that."

These men do not need acids to test the stones that pass before them, year after year, in gorgeous array. The eye is the sole test, and no strange mineral will ever deceive them. When the sorting is over the diamonds are folded into "diamond papers", a description of qualities and weights is written, and the little black boxes are packed and sealed. They travel, not by special messenger as you might suppose, but by registered post.

Diamonds are imperishable, yet millions are spent on them every year. Experts have estimated that the world's stock does not lose five per cent in a hundred years. Somewhere in the dawn of time the Koh-i-noor and the Sancy were born; and they, and most of the famous diamonds of all the centuries, are still giving out their fire. Famous diamonds sometimes disappear, but they are seldom lost to mankind. Their careers are stories of murder and intrigue, robberies and toppling thrones; romance and drama. Long after their owners have been forgotten these diamonds are gathering legend and superstition with their lustre and their charm undimmed.

Will the human race ever tire of the glittering stones that have held the imagination of Shahs and Moguls ever since a cutting industry flourished in Babylon and the Phoenicians sailed away on their freebooting expeditions? I put the problem to one of the foremost Kimberley authorities on the diamond. "Every

woman wants a diamond, and when she has one she wants more," he replied. "The demand touches deep instincts. From the earliest times the diamond has been prized, and no gem has ever taken the place of the diamond in the eyes of women. Sometimes you hear that pearls are coming into fashion at the expense of the diamond; but as a matter of fact, pearls and rubies, emeralds and sapphires, must always rank after the fascination of the wonderful diamond. About half the weight of every good diamond, you must remember, vanishes in the cutting. Many smaller stones are used in cutting the large ones, so that they disappear. Finally, there is the control of the market by the Diamond Syndicate which gives stability right through the trade, from the miner blasting "blue ground" at Kimberley to the salesman in the jeweller's shop. The world can never be sated with diamonds while that system prevails."



Chapter 10
STRANGE LANDINGS

WHEN MOTOR-CARS and aircraft became streamlined and their engines reliable, when the cat's-whisker and crystal wireless set vanished, the charm went out of all these wonders for me. I loved the early days.

I told you about the first car I ever drove. There was the romance of the road. I put on the old wireless headphones at night, and heard the ships talking in crisp dots and dashes. That was the conquest of space. And nearly forty years ago I flew behind a rotary engine with fear and joy in my heart.

In the early days most of the pilots I knew were personalities. Nowadays (and perhaps it is just as well) I do not seem to meet the picturesque and eccentric type of pilot who flourished long ago. Great air lines do not encourage that sort of man. Similarly, a lot of queer experience has gone out of the air. You may still meet with disaster, but the unexpected hazards that aircraft faced before World War I, during that war and for a period of years afterwards, have gone with the biplanes, the wooden propellers and the under-carriages which remained firmly in place until you made a really unhappy landing.

Flying in Southern Africa goes back farther than some people think. Military balloons were used during the occupation of Bechuanaland more than seventy years ago; and British balloon "aces" operated on several fronts before the end of last century in the South African War. Some of those balloons carried wireless transmitters. One of the sights of

Ladysmith during the siege was a balloon tethered to an ox-wagon. It was shot down by the Boers, but General White had another balloon in reserve. Balloon observers sketched the positions of the enemy and spotted for the artillery. They made photographic maps, too, many years before the first air survey.

Before the South African War ended, "pilots" wearing the uniform of the Royal Engineers were going aloft in the perilous heavier-than-air contraptions known as man lifting kites. I said that I loved the early days, but those kites were before my time and I would not have stepped into one unless a pistol had been held at my head.

The first aeroplane I ever watched was a thing of beauty, a graceful Bleriot monoplane flown by a South African pilot named Driver, carrying the first airmail from Kenilworth racecourse to a landing ground beside the Muizenberg vlei. (A more ridiculous route it would have been hard to imagine, but the special stamped cards bearing a date in December 1911 are now valuable.) That little aircraft had a top speed of fifty miles an hour. Before the pilot ventured aloft it was customary to light a candle, and if the wind blew out the flame he packed up and waited for a calmer day. A lot of my friends would still be alive if only the aviation experts had stuck to fifty miles an hour and candles.

I have served in two air forces, and I know the precautions which are taken to avoid disaster. Yet in spite of all safety rules and devices, the crashes linger in my mind. I was lifted out of one myself. Again and again I have been far too close to the fatal results of human errors of judgment.

Many air historians have recorded the early flights in power aircraft by Weston and Driver, Paterson and Kimmerling in South Africa before World War I. These were brave efforts, and I pass on only

because I like to leave the well-known tracks and find the more obscure characters of the by-ways. You will not find the name of Peter Falk in any book I have read, but he was an air pioneer in German South West Africa and he told me of other early German pilots and their adventures.

I called on Peter Falk in Windhoek. He is a short, chubby, benign man in the sixties, and he gained his pilot's licence in March 1913 at a private flying school in Hamburg. Then he joined the German Army as a pilot, logging three hundred hours on Rumplers during 1913, a prodigious amount of flying in those uncertain days. After this experience he was placed on the reserve, and he settled in German South West Africa before the outbreak of World War I.

Falk was in South West when the first aircraft arrived. It was a Pfalz biplane, and it was landed and assembled at Swakopmund in May 1914. Bruno Buchner, the pilot, made the first flight on May 15, and two days later he set off for Windhuk (as they spelt it in German) carrying postcard mail. Those postcards, with five pfennig stamps, fetch high prices today.

Buchner flew over the Namib desert safely and landed first at Karibib. Natives ran for their lives. Every stationmaster reported progress as Büchner flew along the railway line, a pioneer method of navigation which is not scorned by some pilots even now. Okahandja was his next landing, and the long cross-country flight looked like a triumph. On the last stage to Windhoek, however, he encountered headwinds. Twice in forty-five miles he put the Pfalz down to tinker with the engine, at Teufelsbach and Brackwater.

He reached Windhoek on May 26, landing on the present racecourse. The first agricultural show ever organised in the colony had just been opened, and the aeroplane was a sensational exhibit. It cost five marks to enter the tent where

Büchner stood proudly beside the Pfalz answering questions. In calm weather Büchner took up passengers, one at a time, charging twenty marks for three-minute flips round the racecourse. Once he made a forced landing in a river bed in front of Peter Falk's house, but no harm was done.

Büchner decided that flying conditions were good, and announced that after touring South West he would carry right on southwards to Cape Town. But the mountains surrounding Windhoek, the highest in the country, looked frightening from the cockpit of an underpowered Pfalz. (Pilots of much later aircraft hated the Windhoek aerodrome.) So he railed the aeroplane to Rehoboth and flew on again from there.

It was a most ambitious venture at that period, and I do not think any pilot in South Africa flew anything like as far across country before World War I as Büchner did over the South West African plains. He touched down at Keetmanshoop, and then turned westwards and re-crossed the terrifying, empty Namib. On June 25 all Lüderitzbucht came out to welcome him, and he deserved it. By this time the war clouds were blowing up, and the flight to the Union was cancelled. Büchner's aeroplane was shipped to German East Africa before war was declared.

Meanwhile two more private aircraft, an Aviatik and a Roland *doppeldecker*, had arrived in the country to be tested under African conditions. This expedition had official backing. Von Scheele and Fiedler were the pilots. There was also a pilot mechanic named Truck who remained in the country and is still farming there. The aircraft behaved well in spite of the heat, and the Aviatik made a number of flights in the south within its range of two hundred and fifty miles.

A really useful machine was the Aviatik. One of this type had just been awarded a

prize of five thousand pounds in Europe for covering fourteen hundred miles within twenty-four hours. Both the Aviatik and the Roland had one-hundred horse-power Mercedes motors giving them a speed of seventy miles an hour. Their tubular steel construction was in advance of British aircraft design. They also had special compasses, helio apparatus and excellent cameras.

When war broke out pilots and aircraft were taken over immediately by the army, and Peter Falk was appointed air staff officer. The story of the improvised bombs they used – jam tins filled with dynamite and shells with streamers attached to keep the noses down – has been told. Many old soldiers will remember the incident on Christmas Day 1914 when the Aviatik came over as usual and dropped a suitably-inscribed football on the South African camp at Tschaukaib. But there were two incidents which the official war histories overlooked.

One was the forced landing made by the pilot Fiedler near Steinkopf in Namaqualand. I believe that was the only occasion in any war when a hostile aircraft landed on Union soil. Peter Falk told me that Fiedler was operating from Warmbad, observing the movements of South African troops along the Orange River, when his engine failed. The landing speed of the Aviatik was only twenty-five miles an hour, incredible though that may seem to modern pilots. Thus he was able to put the machine down easily. Peter Falk, who was on horseback with a patrol south of the river, galloped up and helped Fiedler to remedy the defect and start his engine. They had to work fast, as South African forces could be seen in the distance. Fiedler got off in time.

The other incident concerned a goat, the regimental mascot of a South African unit. The goat roamed about each camp, grazing where it could. After one experience of aerial bombing it acted as a

“goat radar” outfit. Long before human ears had picked up the sound of an approaching aeroplane the goat would take fright, dash into a tent, and crouch beneath a stretcher. It never gave a false alarm.

I have always wanted to hear a first-hand account of another African flying episode of World War I – the attempt which the Germans made in 1917 to relieve the hard-pressed Von Lettow Vorbeck in East Africa. The British intelligence knew nothing about it until early the following year, when a German bandolier containing ammunition made in Stuttgart in 1917, was found in the Sudan desert. Arabs had previously reported “a noisy cigar marching explosively in the heavens”, but no one in authority had believed them.

In fact, the Germans had dispatched the Zeppelin L 59 from Bulgaria, loaded with over fifty tons of ammunition, rifles, medical stores and many other items. The muslin envelope was to be torn up and used for bandages, and another part of the fabric could be made into tents and clothes. The airship could not return.

It was a forlorn hope, of course, as the Zeppelin had to locate Von Lettow, and his position was vague. Nevertheless they set off hopefully, found their friends the Turks firing on them by mistake, and returned to base for repairs. On the second trip they crossed the Mediterranean safely. When the crew looked down on Africa., they were the first men to do so from an airship.

At forty-five miles an hour the L 59 cruised down the Nile valley, the river guiding them by day and the stars by night. Bockholt, the commander, began to feel his chances of success growing. The idea was to fly low over the Makonde highlands, where Von Lettow had last been reported, and drop a parachutist if troops were sighted. The parachutist would signal a code word if it was safe to land.

Bockholt had covered nearly three thousand miles from his base in Bulgaria when he was recalled by wireless. “Last foothold of Lettow Vorbeck Revala lost,” ran the message. “All Makonde highlands in possession of British. Return immediately.”

This was a blow to the twenty-two men on board the Zeppelin. They would have felt even more disappointed if they had known that Von Lettow was still carrying on his guerrilla warfare; indeed, he did not surrender until after the Armistice. However, the L 59 returned to her base without incident, having covered four thousand two hundred miles. She had been aloft for ninety-five hours, and she still had enough fuel in her tanks for another sixty-four hours.

It was a great and gallant performance. That was World War I, remember, and those were the early days which I find more romantic than this era of jet aircraft and atom bombs.

Though I have flown far and wide in aeroplanes I always wanted to make an airship cruise. I was in London in 1931 when the Graf Zeppelin called, and tried to book a flight round the British Isles for twenty-five pounds; but the newspapers had taken every cabin for their reporters. So I went instead to watch the monster landing at Hanworth with the great Hugo Eckener in command. Eckener was really the only man in the world who could handle a giant airship successfully, and he did it, with great skill, by avoiding storms.

The local fire brigade acted as ground crew when the Graf Zeppelin came down at Hanworth. A rope was dropped from the airship’s bow, and this was made fast to a ring screwed into the earth. Then the long ship was hauled down and trimmed fore and aft, so that she hung poised a few feet above the ground. No sooner had she come into this position than the crowd, forgetting the usual British sense of discipline, jumped over the low rope

barriers and raced in thousands towards the airship. I ran with them. The firemen and police were helpless. Directly below the enormous envelope jostled all these people, *and many of them were smoking.*

I stood peering into the navigating gondola, only a few feet away from Eckener. He was livid with fear, as well he might have been. All the way down the airship members of the crew were leaning out of windows and gondolas and shouting to the crowd in English and German, pleading with them not to smoke. They were conscious of the enormous bags of hydrogen, and so was I; yet I remained there, spellbound, until the loudspeakers came into action and the crowd drifted reluctantly away from the airship. A crowd can be a senseless phenomenon, but it is hard to escape the influence of that powerful, surrounding mass mind.

In the early days, only a few years after World War I, the Belgians started commercial flying in the Congo. I knew one of the first pilots to fly over those dense forests. He told me that more than anything else he dreaded the propellers breaking up in the air. It had happened several times, owing to the steamy heat playing havoc with the three-ply wood and glue. The same man informed me that one of the pioneer air liners vanished one day, and it took six weeks to locate it, in the treetops, with all on board dead.

The old hands faced queer risks in Africa. I remember a pilot attempting to land at the Salisbury aerodrome was kept aloft by swarms of locust birds. He saw them on the ground, and decided not to risk a landing for fear of breaking his propellers. Zooming and circling did not disturb them, so finally he fired a Verey light and dispersed the flock. Locusts have brought machines to the ground on several occasions, and experienced pilots always steer

clear of a swarm. A locust drawn into the air intake pipe stopped more than one engine.

Then there are those unwelcome "stowaways" that sometimes appear after a machine has left the ground. The late Captain Davenport once came upon a large snake in the fuselage after landing; it must have travelled hundreds of miles with him. My old friend, the late John Williamson found himself aloft in East Africa with a swarm of bees, which became alarmed by the roar of the engine and flew out to sting the pilot. He had to suffer in silence, for there was nothing he could do. Wasps gave a great deal of trouble in that territory, for they crept into the Pitot tube and put the air speed indicator out of action. On another occasion Williamson found a nest of field mice in his aeroplane.

A pilot who flew over the salt lake at Nakuru, Kenya, suddenly observed a flock of flamingos rising ahead like a pink and white cloud. He landed after a severe fright, for several of the flamingos had fouled the machine and partially jammed the controls.

Stranger still have been the unexpected adventures of pilots on the ground. A South African Air Force officer engaged in air irrigation survey in Zululand was astounded to see a large, angry rhinoceros charging through the camp. Two machines were standing in the open, and when the crews saw the rhino coming towards them with head down like a battering ram, they clambered into the cockpits and on to the wings. The rhino stopped six feet short, sniffed and turned away, scattering petrol tins as he went. A German air expedition filming big-game in East Africa was not so fortunate. One machine was attacked by a lion, which damaged a wing. Another was charged by a rhinoceros and a man in the cockpit was injured. A third machine was destroyed by a cyclone.

The sun may be the air pilot's enemy in tropical Africa. Lady Heath, flying northwards to Bulawayo, felt sudden pains in the back of her neck. She remembered shutting off her engine and putting the nose down in a glide. The landing must have been made by instinct for she had lost consciousness when the machine touched the long gross. Natives were pouring milk down her throat when she came to her senses.

Air accidents sometimes have queer sequels in South Africa; none more remarkable perhaps, than that of the sick man who was cured by a crash. He was a government official in Ovamboland, suffering from blackwater fever, and an aeroplane was sent to fetch him to hospital in Windhoek. It was a hot day, and after a long run the machine failed to rise. The undercarriage struck a palm tree, and the machine ended up on her nose. The patient, whose condition was critical, was thrown forward heavily and bruised, while the pilot was taken out suffering from shock. An urgent message to Windhoek brought a doctor by air. He found the patient making a rapid recovery from a grave disease in which any movement may be fatal.

One crash between the wars which still haunts me occurred near Sir Lowry's Pass in the early days of the South African air mail service. It was a type of aircraft which became notorious all over the world for wing collapses. That day a violent black southeaster was raging. The aircraft, with pilot and two passengers, had just come over the mountains when a wing broke off. I raced out there for the newspaper, and found the burnt-out machine in a field, the charred bodies covered with sacks. No doubt they had all been killed instantly when they hit the ground, before the fire started. No one could have survived that impact. But the seconds while the doomed aeroplane plunged wildly to earth, no longer

answering the controls; that was a period I should not like to face.

This crash had a peculiar sequel. There was a small parcel of diamonds on board, worth about a thousand pounds. Only one man in the crowd surrounding the wreck knew of this parcel. He was the Cape Town agent of the private company which operated the service in those pioneer days. For a fortnight after the crash he sifted the soil all round the wreck, and he recovered every diamond except one.

Old aircraft do not always go to the scrapheap in Africa. No doubt some of you remember the Silver Queen II, flown by Van Ryneveld and Brand in 1920 from Egypt to a point near Bulawayo where they crashed. Years afterwards I learned that the fuel tanks were being used by a farmer as grain bins for his poultry. He had named his place Silver Queen Farm. A broken propeller decorated the farm gateway. Rudder and tail planes were hanging as historic relics in the Bulawayo drill-hall.

Then there was the Vickers biplane in which Broome and Cockerell flew from London to Tabora in Tanganyika during the same early period of ill-fated attempts to reach Cape Town by air. After the crash the heavy bomber lay in the bush for a time. Then the settlers found themselves in need of a club. They made the Vickers fuselage into a neat saloon bar, while the undamaged wings formed a shady veranda.

Perhaps the strangest tale of all was the discovery in 1928 of a small and ancient aeroplane on the roof of a high Johannesburg office building. It had not been flown there. Someone had dumped it on the roof, presumably when he found that he had no further use for it. No one had visited the roof for years when the aeroplane was found. The owner of the building had never suspected that it was

there. It was just a mysterious echo of the early days.

I have known many brave airmen, many famous pilots in war and in peace. But the most remarkable aeronaut I ever met was a low-caste Indian who performed under the nickname of Fearless Peter. I was strolling round a carnival show on the racecourse at Port Louis, Mauritius when I saw an old, patched balloon being inflated. It was a fire balloon, the first I had ever seen, and the last. A couple of dozen men were keeping it down as the hot air went through a pipe into the envelope. As the balloon swelled, the crowd grew; there were soldiers of the garrison, seamen and stewards. Everyone was leaving the big wheel, the merry-go-round and shooting galleries and paying to enter the arena where the balloon strained at its ropes.

At this moment Fearless Peter appeared, gorgeous in the spangles and knee-breeches of a circus artist. His black hair shone with oil, and his breast with imitation medals. I felt that many an air hero with rows of genuine decorations would not have cared to gain his ribbons in the same way as Fearless Peter.

When the balloon was full Stanton, the tough Australian who ran the show, made a speech. For thirty cents, he announced anyone in the crowd could shake hands with Fearless Peter. Many did so, for there is a Roman holiday atmosphere about these affairs and if anything went wrong the people who had shaken hands with Fearless Peter would be able to boast of the experience.

“This brave boy is about to rise thousands of feet above your heads,” declared Stanton when he saw the last cent had been squeezed out of the handshakes. “His life depends on one frail rope. How many of you would risk your lives like Fearless Peter? Give him a cheer, I say.”

The crowd cheered, and Fearless Peter ran his hands nervously over his parachute harness.

“Are you all ready, Pete?” inquired Stanton.

“All ready, boss.”

“Then let go.”

In a second Fearless Peter was a hundred feet above the crowd, clinging to the little trapeze which hung below the open, smoking mouth of the balloon. In two seconds the balloon had dwindled to the size of an orange. In ten seconds it was time for Peter to jump, before the balloon drifted away over the city and the sea. And he jumped! You could see the streak of the opening parachute as he flashed downwards. You could hear the whip crack as the parachute opened. Mercifully it was in a better state of repair than the balloon.

With the weight of Peter gone, the balloon capsized, hot air and smoke rushed out, and the bag followed the parachute to the ground. The race-course was covered with people, running frantically, each one intent on being the first to shake hands with Peter. Down Peter came, touching the earth lightly, then rolling over and bumping as the wind pulled the parachute.

That night I went to Stanton’s Midway Show again, for I wanted to talk to Fearless Peter. I walked past the swing-boats and the caravans, and I found him at last. His moment of glory was over. Fearless Peter was back at his usual job, in charge of the coconut shy.



Chapter 11
A SECRET OF THE SANDS

SOUTH WEST AFRICA runs through my life as a series of vivid and often dramatic memories. When I think of all those journeys through the years to the farthest corners of the land I realise that it is not always a mistake to return to places where you have been happy. Never have I found disappointment in South West Africa. Each time I cross the frontier my affection for the country revives.

It is a land of mysteries. Traces of strange people, reports of queer animals and signs of old adventures remain unexplained. You never know what scene of desperate struggle you will find round the next dune; and the barren country usually provides the most baffling riddles. Some graves speak for themselves. The spent cartridges still lie on the scene of the skirmishes of long ago; and occasionally there is an inscription: *"Gefecht zwischen den deutschen Schutztruppen und den Hottentotten."* There were also lost patrols, and men whose skeletons still lie where they died of thirst.

But it is not the discovery of tragedies which makes me love the country. It is not the thirst it raises. It is hard to analyse the appeal of South West Africa, though I appreciate the change of atmosphere it offers. German names make a difference; Hohenhorst and Hohenfelde, Rosenhof and Mecklenburg, among the Afrikaans and English names. South West has forts and castles. Once I came across a rail-car, on the narrow gauge line at Usakos. It bore the German eagles and the insignia of the Crown Prince, for whose use it had

been made. And they told me it had reached a speed of nearly ninety miles an hour on the two-foot track. One does not have such encounters in the Union.

I like the villages of wide streets and low, solid houses; the kameeldoring trees in the burning sand; the date palms round many an oasis; the luscious meat and fine cream and butter; the family parties in the bars, which open on Sundays, according to the easy-going German system. I remember the carnations growing out of the desert at Swakopmund and the pink tints of the Walvis Bay flamingos.

Yet when all is said and done, the reason why I have gone to South West Africa again and again is that only there have I been able to penetrate almost unknown country. One day in the police station at Maltahohe I pointed to a spot marked Sossus Vlei on the huge map on the wall. "What's it like at Sossus Vlei?" I asked, for the vlei was far out in the Namib desert and one would hardly expect to find a vlei in such a place.

"I've never been there," confessed the police sergeant. "Our patrol's don't go there and I've never met anyone who has been there." I asked a number of people questions about Sossus Vlei, but I have still to find anyone who has visited that vlei in the desert. And I have not reached Sossus Vlei myself – yet.

In the forbidden Kaokoveld, where I spent a memorable month with the Bernard Carp scientific expedition, there are many mysteries. The coast especially, that grim shore which has become known as "Skeleton Coast", holds ghastly secrets.

During the German days, before the fort at Zessfontein became a ruin, a party of Kaokoveld natives arrived one day escorting a little white girl, fair-haired, about six or seven years old. The officer in charge of Zessfontein heard a weird tale that day. It seems that old Chief

Oorlog had sent a party to the coastal pans for salt. These men came upon a spoor which twisted away across the barren veld leaving a groove. They had seen nothing like it before, but they identified the tracks of wagon wheels as well, and so they followed the spoor. It led them to a small forest where there was a spring. There they found the wagon. One wheel had been damaged beyond repair, and the travellers had replaced it with a tree-trunk, which had left the deep groove.

All the oxen were dead. The little white girl came out of a hut; and in the hut was a small white boy. He died next day. In another hut some distance away were the bodies of several white people, men and women. They had been dead for a long time. The men hurried back to their chief with the little girl, and thus she came at last to Zessfontein. The officer tried to solve the mystery of that ill-fated wagon, but he failed. The little girl went to a German mission, and finally she was taken to one of their schools in Germany. No one ever gathered the details of that old Kaokoveld disaster.

One mystery of South West Africa puzzled me for years. I know the answer, now; indeed, I might have revealed this secret earlier, but it belonged to that class of tale which could not be told while the people concerned were alive.

No doubt there is still a file at police headquarters in Windhoek dealing with the Baby Austin car which entered the Kaokoveld illegally from Angola in 1931 and returned to Angola before the trespassers could be arrested. Tracks were found all the way from the Kunene to Fort Rock Point and beyond, an almost incredible journey in the sand and sandstorms of that coast for such a small car. The late Major C. H. L. Hahn, commissioner of Ovamboland, made a dash for the Kunene mouth accompanied by his wife, a police sergeant and twenty-four carriers, but all this effort was wasted

and the police never knew the details of the raid. It baffled the Diamond Detective Department for many years.

I gave an account of Hahn's journey (told to me by Mrs. Hahn) in a previous book.[5] That brought the man who organised the raid to see me. I promised him that I would not mention his name during his lifetime, and as he was only a middle-aged man I never expected to tell the story at all. He died in 1954.

This man who planned the Baby Austin raid was Mr. Joseph Suskin of Highlands North, Johannesburg, and he was employed by a syndicate which included a highly-placed politician of dubious reputation. The politician had heard that the Kaokoveld coast was rich in diamonds, but Mr. A. J. Werth, Administrator of South West Africa, was refusing to allow prospectors into that part of the country. However, the politician gave his guarantee (for what it was worth) that if Suskin and his men were arrested, he would see that they were not brought into court.

Suskin left Johannesburg in June 1930 with seven men, two cars, two motor-lorries, four rifles and ample money for the expedition. It was the start of a most unusual adventure; one which was not to end until July the following year. Suskin's convoy drove up through Ovamboland into Angola. They knew it would be dangerous to force an entry into the Kaokoveld from South West Africa, whereas they might reach the Kaokoveld coast from Angola without anyone in authority becoming aware of it.

The rifles were a mistake. Portuguese officials dislike private individuals to own firearms. It savours of revolution. There was a delay of three weeks, while Suskin persuaded one official after another that his party merely wished to shoot for the pot. Then they were allowed to drive on,

[5] "Lords of the Last Frontier."

over the mountains and down to Mossamedes and the sea.

South they went, all of them on board one motor-lorry, along the desert coast to Port Alexandre, a little fishing station with two streets made of concrete slabs. Already an Ovambo who spoke Portuguese and Afrikaans had been engaged as interpreter. Now an old Portuguese hunter named Pimental joined the party as guide. He had been in Angola for more than forty years and had led a previous expedition to the remote parts of the Kunene. He wanted five pounds a day for his services, but Suskin got him for two pounds.

Pimental took them along dry river beds, and after four days they reached a point ten miles from the Kunene river mouth. There were no roads in that region. It was heavy going, and they were dodging boulders most of the time. About a mile from the river mouth they found a place which seemed to be narrow enough for the crossing. So the lorry went to the fishing settlement at Tiger Bay (thirty miles north of the Kunene mouth) and returned with a load of empty wine barrels. Suskin and his men then set to work making a raft. They wasted several weeks on this task, but at each attempt the current was too strong and the raft showed signs of sinking.

By this time Suskin was running short of food and money, so he decided to return to Mossamedes and cable to Johannesburg for money. “I walked up the beach from Tiger Bay to Port Alexandre with several native carriers,” Suskin told me. “It was sixty-five miles, but it would have been easier walking five hundred miles on firm ground. At every step I went ankle-deep into the sand. The water cask was too small, and I was thirsty when I arrived after a forced march of two days.”

Suskin hired a car at Port Alexandre and drove to Mossamedes. The money was sent promptly, but he did not fancy

walking down that beach again and he had to wait some time before a fifty-foot schooner picked him up. She plied between Tiger Bay and the Congo with salted fish, under sail only. Suskin found the whole expedition waiting for him at Tiger Bay. They had left the river owing to shortage of food. Senhor Bobela Motta, the hospitable *chefe du Poste* or magistrate at Tiger Bay had been housing and feeding them.

Suskin led his party back to the river, and another attempt was made to construct a raft which would float the motor-lorry across. Again they failed. All the expedition members except Suskin then decided that the venture was hopeless. They returned to Mossamedes, where the other vehicles had been left, and drove back to South Africa. Suskin stayed on with the native interpreter. He had made up his mind that he would not give up the quest before he had seen something of the desert coast beyond the river.

It meant walking, and Suskin was prepared to walk. Motta, who had been so kind to the party, heard the full story of Suskin's quest and offered to accompany him. He organised a column of sixteen native carriers, and they all crossed the Kunene in a boat and set off southwards along the beach. They were in forbidden territory, but the chances of dying of thirst were probably greater than the risk of encountering a police patrol.

Here I should explain the reasons which led the government of South West Africa to place an "iron curtain" between the Kaokoveld and the rest of the territory. Diamonds had been found in fabulous quantities a long way to the south, and it had always been suspected that there might be diamond deposits along the Kaokoveld coast. However, the government denied that the ban (which was imposed in 1929 and is still in force) had anything to do with diamonds. It was stated officially that the main reason was

to avoid long and possibly dangerous police patrols in that unmapped corner of the country. At that time motor transport was almost unknown in the remote parts of the Kaokoveld, and the police used camels and horses.

Another reason given was the presence of lung sickness among cattle along the Angola side of the border and in parts of the Kaokoveld. By proclaiming a cattle-free zone in the Kaokoveld, it was hoped that the disease would be kept out of South West Africa. This aim was in fact achieved. Nevertheless, to this day many people in South West Africa firmly believe that the Kaokoveld was closed because a treasure-house of diamonds had been discovered. The maximum penalty laid down for entering the prohibited area was £500 or one year's imprisonment. Suskin thought he was safe.

As the column led by Suskin and Motta marched, they left dumps of food every twenty miles. They had an outfit for distilling sea water, and this worked extremely well. Driftwood provided the fuel, and no one went thirsty in that featureless, glaring desert. Cape Frio was the first point of interest. Five miles before they reached the Cape, they found the beach strewn with deck chairs, cupboards and other ship's furniture, beds and at least a hundred demijohns of port wine. They opened several of the wicker bottles and found the wine delicious. Motta knew something about this flotsam. Seven years previously the Portuguese steamer Mossamedes had become a total loss on Cape Frio in fog. She was a passenger liner of seven thousand tons, formerly the P. & O. liner Sumatra. She had 258 souls on board when she left Table Bay on her last voyage, bound north for the Angola ports and Lisbon. One night shortly after midnight the coast radio stations and half a dozen ships picked up a distress call from the Mossamedes : "Ashore Cape Frio S.O.S."

But the first ship to reach Cape Frio found the Portuguese liner abandoned – anchor and cable out, main gangway lowered, a rope ladder trailing over the side near the stern, the lifeboats gone.

A French gunboat, the famous old British sloop Dwarf, a Portuguese cruiser and a German liner all joined in the search for the fleet of lifeboats. Seven boats had left the ship. Six boats, with 227 people on board, were picked up. The fate of the seventh boat remained a mystery. There were women and children in that boat, and two British passengers: Mr. John Lane, a farmer, and Mr. C. C. Spring, a civil engineer.

Suskin and Motta solved the mystery of the seventh boat. They halted at Cape Frio after a march of more than sixty miles from the river; and there on the beach, amid further wreckage, they found thirty skeletons.

"It looked to me as though these people had landed safely from the wreck and then died of thirst," Suskin told me. "I slept on a sand dune at Cape Frio that night, and close to my blankets I found a pair of shoes. Next day I dug into the sand and found coat buttons, and then the skull of a girl of about fifteen. She must have wandered away from the others and died alone. We buried her with the other skeletons and Motta said a Roman Catholic prayer at the graveside. Then we made a wooden cross and marched on."

Before leaving the Cape Frio area Suskin found a huge packing case, evidently part of the lost liner's cargo. The planks were broken and Suskin put his hand in just as an eight-inch scorpion walked out. They opened the case and found women's dresses, ostrich feather hats, underclothes, crockery, cutlery, pens and pencils. The native carriers were almost naked, and they were feeling the cold sea winds. Suskin invited them to help themselves

from the packing case. When the expedition moved on the savages were clad in silk evening dresses. “It provided a little comic relief after the discovery of the skeletons,” said Suskin.

They reached a point fifteen miles south of Cape Frio, examining the beach for signs of diamondiferous gravel but finding nothing promising. Then the *capitao* of the native carriers approached Motta and declared: “We are now in cannibal country and we are afraid to go on. Suppose the cannibals want to eat us?”

“Eat them first,” replied Motta firmly.

Suskin and Motta decided, however, that it was no use proceeding on foot. There was a huge area to be searched, and the Kaokoveld diamonds would not be found until they succeeded in bringing some form of motor transport across the river. Suskin thought it would be possible with the aid of a light car such as a Baby Austin, which could be rafted across the river.

So the expedition marched back to the Kunene. Suskin climbed thankfully into his motor-lorry on the north bank and drove with tyres deflated up the beach to Port Alexandre. The lorry would go no farther; he abandoned it, and hired a car for the drive to Mossamedes. From there he took a ship to Cape Town and returned to Johannesburg to report to the syndicate.

The syndicate would not give up the plan. Every member was convinced that somewhere on the Kaokoveld coast there was a beach littered and glittering with diamonds. Suskin’s idea of a Baby Austin expedition was approved and the car was supplied. In April 1931 Suskin sailed from Cape Town for Mossamedes in the Portuguese liner Colonial. This time he had one companion, the late Mr. S. O. Swailes, an adventurous Irishman who had been a soldier, farmer and railway official in charge of mules. Swailes had



Sam SWAILES and the baby car on the Kaokoveld coast.

been in the Kaokoveld in 1928, helping to repatriate the Angola Boers, and was selected because of his previous experience of the country. He was neither an expert motor mechanic nor a man accustomed to handling diamonds.

Suskin and Swailes landed with the baby car at Mossamedes on April 27, 1931, and set out across the coastal desert a few days later. The open car, stripped of its hood, windscreen and headlamps, travelled well. Suskin told me that he covered one stretch of nearly fifty miles at night without any lights; he was on the beach between the dunes and the sea, watching the phosphorescent water out of the corner of his eye all the time.

When they reached the southern end of Tiger Bay it became necessary to put the car on a boat to transport it to the fishing station on the far side of the bay. The car fell into the sea, and next day they discovered that the damage was serious. They could not repair the magneto and battery on the spot, and so both men returned to Mossamedes by fishing boat with the car. The expedition was delayed for a month as a result of this accident. Nevertheless, on June 8 they were at the mouth of the Kunene, making a raft. At the river mouth they found two diamond prospectors, one Belgian and one American, and they had a number of native labourers with them. This was a stroke of luck for Suskin and Swailes. The river was running strongly and the water had spread out to a width of about half a mile at the mouth. Suskin and Swailes would never have got the car across unaided.

“On the first trip we had shot eight crocodiles near the river mouth,” Suskin recalled. “This time we saw a herd of gemsbok crossing the river in the shallows at the mouth, and Swailes challenged me to wade across. It makes my blood curdle to think of it now, but both of us got over safely. Then we knew that we could haul

the car across provided we had enough men to prevent the raft from drifting out to sea."

Their friend the Belgian prospector lent them his labourers, and on June 13 the raft was taken across and the car landed undamaged on the south bank. Suskin and Swailes had one native with them for the car dash along the Kaokoveld coast. They had the best of provisions, tinned Madeira butter and Swiss cheese. Nevertheless, the successful river crossing marked the beginning rather than the end of their hardships.

"It blew so hard that you could lean on the wind at an angle of forty-five degrees and not fall over," went on Suskin. "A lot of sand came with that wind and made life a misery. We camped above high-water mark, which we judged by the flotsam and jetsam, and spent four days there taking the car to pieces to find a defect. Swailes slept in the car and I camped alongside under canvas. On the fifth morning we were all ready to move off when a wave came roaring up the beach and passed the spot where the car was standing. We got away all right, but if that wave had come in the night while the car was being repaired it would have wiped out our expedition."

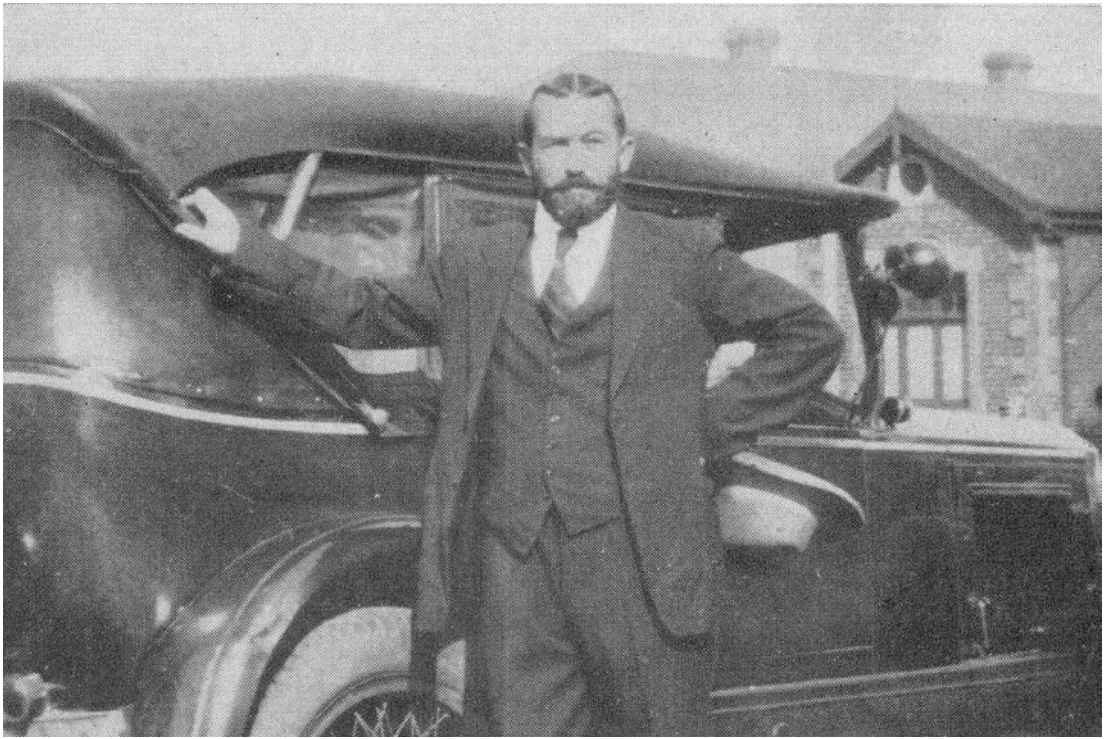
They drove to Cape Frio, a low, rocky cape where the seals come on shore occasionally. There they left a tin of petrol. South of Cape Frio, beyond the turning point of Suskin's previous journey, they came upon a wooden sailing ship half buried in the dunes and about a hundred yards above high-water mark. (This coast is one of the most changeable in the world, and long stretches of it are extending westwards as the strong Benguella current throws up more and more sand.) Swailes found a chair with a name-plate which he took away as a souvenir. The plate read "Victor N. Franco", and that may have been either

the name of the ship or the owner of the chair.

Two hundred miles south of Kunene they found a gravel deposit with about a hundred pegs dated December 1929 and marked “Precious Stones”, left by a prospector named Isaacs. “We dug in this area, but found no diamonds,” Suskin informed me. Near the gravel was a hatch cover from a ship and the skeleton of a white man. Burnt into the boards were the words: “W. McMann, survivor of ...” Swailes, who noted this discovery in his diary, could not decipher the rest of the inscription. At another spot some miles away Swailes found eleven more skeletons and some abandoned carts. He buried all the skeletons, collected various personal articles and handed them over to Motta, the Portuguese magistrate, when he returned to Tiger Bay.

Suskin did not mention the episode of the skeletons when telling me his story. It is possible that he was prospecting in a different area when Swailes found the skeletons. An incident which both men noted at this time was the barking of wild dogs round their camp at night. “Swailes said the scouts of the pack had found us, and that the rest of the dogs would come up and tear us to pieces,” said Suskin. “On this occasion, to avoid trouble with the Portuguese, we had brought no firearms, and we felt uneasy. One day we came to a large clump of reeds in a river bed to the north of Fort Rock Point. There is a water-hole among the reeds, but we saw a spoor which resembled a lion, and dared not enter the reeds unarmed.”

Suskin and Swailes were some way to the south of Fort Rock Point when they decided they had gone far enough. They drove back to the Kunene without incident, taking four days. With the aid of the labourers the car was floated over the river. Suskin and Swailes returned to Mossamedes, cabled for money, and



Sam SWAILES before the diamong raiding expedition started.

finally reached their homes in Johannesburg.

The mystery of the Baby Austin tracks, found at various points on the desolate coast long afterwards, has been solved. But the diamond legend cannot be cleared up with the same degree of satisfaction. Suskin told me emphatically: “I believe one of the early prospectors salted a claim with Namaqualand diamonds – hence the stories of great wealth which persist to this day.”

Mr. Sam Swailes, son of Suskin’s partner in the venture, gave me the following information in a letter: “My father discovered a very rich deposit of diamonds. When I asked him why he had not told Joe Suskin, who was in a camp a few miles away, he replied that he did not trust the syndicate which had financed the trip. They had not fulfilled their obligations while he was away. So my father thought it wise to maintain silence just then, although he did mention to Joe Suskin at Mossamedes that he had found by chance what they were looking for.”

Who was McMann? I put the question to Mr. Swailes, junior, and here is his reply: “My father thought that he was the last member to die of the expedition whose skeletons he found beside the carts. It is possible, however, that McMann was a shipwreck survivor. My father brought the board carved by McMann back to Johannesburg with him. He burnt the board left by Isaacs, showing the position of the gravel deposit.”

You remember the American prospector working at the Kunene river mouth when Suskin and Swailes passed over? He reported the raid to the South African Police, but the message took so long to reach police headquarters in Pretoria that the diamond raiders had departed long before Major Hahn and his party reached the coast.

Since then many raiders have gone hopefully in quest of the diamond treasure of the Kaokoveld. They have searched by air, land and sea. Some have doubtless escaped undetected, like Suskin and Swailes. Others have paid heavy fines or ended up in gaol. You will not hear of Sam Swailes, son of the late S. O. Swailes, in any raiding expedition. He lent me his father's diary (with certain pages torn out) and the photographs of the Baby Austin expedition. Sam Swailes knows the Kaokoveld coast, for he was there on naval service during World War II; but he promised his father that he would never go there illegally. If ever the Kaokoveld is thrown open to prospectors, however, Sam Swailes will be on his way, with the missing pages of the diary in his pocket.



Chapter 12
LEGENDS OF THE VICTORIA FALLS

MOSI-OA-TUNYA! "You must hear the thunder before you realise to the full why the Mashonas called this place "the smoke that sounds". But I was dizzy so close to the edge, and moved away to clear my head.

In the Rain Forest I found myself thinking of a map I had seen, d'Anville's map printed by Isaac Tirion in Amsterdam nearly two centuries ago. It showed a "Groote Waterval", half way across Southern Africa, and "Zimbaoe" in the land of Monomotapa.

Some historians believe there were white men staring at the roaring waters of the Victoria Falls many years before David Livingstone arrived. It has long been my belief that Kipling was right when he wrote of the "lone grey company before the pioneers". I have found clear proof of such adventurers in more than one of Africa's remote corners. The legends of the Victoria Falls are worth studying.

I am aware of a modern official attitude in the Rhodesia's which is sarcastic and resentful when any claim is made which conflicts with that of the explorer whose memorial stands near the Devil's Cataract. However, the reputation of David Livingstone is unassailable. He made the Victoria Falls known to the world, and the achievements of his noble life rose far above geographical discoveries. Now let me add that I do not think that Livingstone was the first at the Falls.



Some historians believe there were white men staring at the roaring waters of the Victoria Falls many years before David LIVINGSTONE arrived.

Earliest of all claimants are the Portuguese. Some of their maps, drawn between the years 1600 and 1700, and housed in the Vatican library, depict a "Grande Cataract" on a river which must be the Zambesi, then known to the Portuguese as the Cuama. (I shall deal with that "Grande Cataract" later.) I discussed the Portuguese theory with Mr. Edward C. Rashleigh, author of a standard work on the world's great waterfalls; and he had found some evidence in favour of Father Silbiera, a Portuguese priest, having visited the Falls early in the eighteenth century.

Captain J. J. Reynard, a former curator of the Victoria Falls, carried out a great deal of research in this direction, aided by Father E. King. Both these investigators were impressed by the Portuguese claim. The old explorers out of Lisbon performed mighty feats. Barros, the historian, mentioned Lake Nyasa early in the sixteenth century, though Livingstone in 1859 was the official discoverer. Lopez published a book of travel in 1578, and his map showed not only Nyasa but Victoria Nyanza and Tanganyika. It is not disputed that the Portuguese knew of Zimbabwe centuries ago. That name (spelt Simbaoe) appeared on their maps in the middle of the sixteenth century, and their knights in armour penetrated the present Rhodesia in search of gold not long afterwards. They were at Zimbabwe, and they might have gone as far as the Falls. However, Mr. Reynard and Father King made the sad discovery that the earthquake and fire which devastated Lisbon in 1775 had destroyed the Zambesi records.

Here I must explain a trap into which many have fallen – the "Grande Cataracte" of so many old maps. There is a dramatic gorge on the Zambesi just above Tete, and six hundred miles downstream from the Victoria Falls. This gorge contains the Kebra-basa rapids, ranking

next to the Victoria Falls in grandeur. The rapids form a spectacle which no cartographer could possibly ignore. They are several hundred miles from the sea, far enough inland to cause endless confusion when inexperienced searchers pore over the rough maps on which the cataracts appear. One such map is the Boulton map of 1794, in the Parliamentary library in Cape Town. Naturally the “Grande Cataracte” is not placed exactly where the Victoria Falls were found, but the amateur regards that as a pardonable error.

In fact, the old map-makers often knew what they were doing. The “Grande Cataracte” was something their countrymen had seen. It was never intended to represent the Victoria Falls. So all the Portuguese claims remain unproved, and there is a long gap before the next possible visitor appears on the scene. He is Karel Trichardt, eldest son of the redoubtable Louis. These two voortrekkers were in the front rank as explorers, and nowadays every schoolchild in South Africa learns of their journeys.

Karel Trichardt made an enterprising voyage along the East African coast in a Portuguese schooner in 1838, seeking a healthy land where the trekkers he had left at Delagoa Bay might settle. He went as far as the coast of Abyssinia, and watched the arrival in Berbera of a caravan of elephants, laden with trade goods and guarded by armed horsemen. The schooner remained for weeks and months at certain ports. Trichardt pushed boldly inland at several points through unknown country. He also marched with carriers from Sofala to Zimbabwe; and from Quelimane he set out on a safari that took him some way up the Zambesi. Many writers have suggested that Trichardt discovered the Victoria Falls on this journey. So firm is the belief in some quarters that a geography pamphlet

approved by the Transvaal education department gives it as a fact.

Trichardt, of course, visited the Kebra-basa rapids, hence the oft-repeated error. There was not time for him to have reached the Falls, and he never claimed to have done so. (Mr. D. W. Kruger of the Pretoria Archives staff made these points absolutely clear in a paper he wrote some years ago.) Trichardt died in 1901, and shortly before his death at the age of ninety he related his most memorable experiences to G. A. Ode, State Historian of the South African Republic. The life story Ode recorded proves that Trichardt saw the "waterfalls somewhere south of Sandia", which fixes them as the Kebra-basa rapids. No one has been able to trace any other period in Karel Trichardt's life when he might have visited the Falls. He was the sort of man who would have allowed nothing to thwart his effort to reach the Falls if he had been anywhere in the neighbourhood. Sir George Cory, the historian, firmly believed that Trichardt saw the Falls, but I think that he, too, was a victim of the Kebra-basa rapids.

Next on the scene is Henry Hartley, a heavy club-footed man with blue-grey eyes and leonine hair. For many years he roamed the wilderness which became Rhodesia and the Kalahari desert. His descendants are sure that he visited the Victoria Falls six years before Livingstone; and I think they have made out a fairly convincing case.

Hartley came of an 1820 Settler family. When the voortrekkers departed he was gripped by the spirit of adventure. Not long afterwards he moved up to the Transvaal and started the Magaliesberg tobacco industry which still flourishes. He crossed the Limpopo for the first time in 1846 accompanied by a number of servants including a Hottentot wagon-driver named Cresjan.

Another trek began when Hartley's eldest son Fred was three years old. That fixes the year as 1849. They went farther north than they had ever been before, until they came to an area where a steady sound as of thunder was heard in the distance. Hartley investigated the sound, and thus he and Cresjan came to the brink of the Victoria Falls.

Captain R. Hartley Thackeray, a nephew, took down the details of this journey from members of the family and men who had been closely associated with Hartley. The description of the scene given by the Hottentot was also remembered and noted; for the Hottentot had spoken in wonder of the rainbow that hung over the Falls and the drenching rain that fell from a cloudless sky.

Mr. Henry Hartley, junior, youngest son of the Magaliesberg pioneer, was still alive in Johannesburg in 1948 at the age of eighty-eight. He maintained that his father had often told him the story of his discovery, and he mentioned an interesting sequel. Hartley the hunter used to sell his ivory, horns and hides to a storekeeper named Forsman in Potchefstroom. He told Forsman about his journey to the Falls. One day in 1852, Forsman introduced Hartley to a traveller who wanted detailed instructions for reaching the Falls, and Hartley supplied them. The traveller was Livingstone.

Mr. H. R. Raikes, former principal of the Witwatersrand University, believes that his grandfather, W. C. Oswell, reached the Falls before Livingstone. Oswell was a thin, charming man, a great elephant hunter, and he ranked high as an explorer. (He received the Paris Geographical Society's gold medal for the discovery of Lake Ngami, while Livingstone was awarded the English equivalent.) It is not disputed that the earliest accurate map showing the position of the Victoria Falls was that drawn by Oswell in 1851 after his journey to the Zambesi with Living-

stone. I have never understood why Livingstone and Oswell did not visit the Falls on that occasion – if indeed Oswell did not do so – for Oswell's map bears the remark: "Waterfall. Spray seen ten miles."

Oswell never wrote anything about his travels. He was a modest man who preferred his friend Livingstone to take the credit for their discoveries. There is some doubt about Oswell's routes in the neighbourhood of the Falls, and so it is possible that he had a glimpse of the great waterfall during the 1851 journey; hence the family legend. Oswell was notoriously lazy about writing. If he had not been lazy, the story of the Falls might have differed from the accepted version.

James Chapman, the first man to travel overland from Durban to Walvis Bay in 1855, is thought by some writers to have seen the Victoria Falls on the way. I can find no ground for this belief, though I have searched the Chapman manuscripts in the Cape Archives with great care. No doubt the idea arose when a study of Chapman's routes showed that he had once been within seventy miles of the Falls.

Chapman, however, does tell a queer story of a man he encountered in 1852, when he was returning from his Deka River expedition. This man, named J. Simpson, was in distress. He informed Chapman that he had been trading and hunting along the tsetse area of the Chobe, where all his oxen had died. Simpson declared he had travelled down the Zambesi from Linyanti, and had discovered a great waterfall. Soon afterwards Simpson left South Africa to take part in the Australian gold rush. He made no claim apart from his interesting conversation with Chapman. I sometimes wish that all explorers would yield to the common impulse which even the great Livingstone was unable to resist, and carve their names and dates on trees. Then many a legend would become a certainty.

A persistent claim to the Victoria Falls discovery is made by descendants of one of the old Boer hunters, Jan Viljoen. This adventurous spirit was “wanted” by the British authorities for the part he had taken in the Boomplaats fight. Viljoen linked up with Chapman for a time. Then he organised expeditions of his own by wagon into Msilikazi’s country and went to the Falls with a guide and fifty armed men Msilikazi had provided. The white men who accompanied him were his sons George and Petrus, Jacobus Erasmus, Piet Jacobs and Hermanus Engelbrecht.

This party, according to the Viljoen family tradition, visited the Falls three times before Livingstone – in 1851, 1853 and 1854. The tale was handed down with a wealth of detail, and there is no doubt that Viljoen and his companions did visit the Falls. However, it was only when the survivors of these hunting expeditions were old men that anyone thought of writing down their experiences. By that time the old men had got the dates wrong. Dr. H. C. de Wet, who investigated the legend, found that the missionary Moffat was the first man to travel by wagon to Bulawayo; and Msilikazi was alarmed at the sight of this strange vehicle. That was in 1855, and Viljoen really visited Msilikazi for the first time in 1859. Livingstone paid a second visit to the Victoria Falls in 1860. At that time the Boer hunters were unaware of Livingstone’s previous visit, and so they claimed to have reached the Falls first. The legend of Viljoen’s prior discovery still lingers.

A fascinating and definite narrative is to be found in the records of the Pretorius family of Marydale, Cape Province. It was told many years ago by Willem Hendrik Pretorius of Rietpoort in the Waterberg district, Transvaal, and set down by his grandson, Pieter C. Pringle of Marydale.

W. H. Pretorius was born at Graaff-Reinet in 1821 and lived to be a hundred. He

took part in the defeat of Dingaan under Commandant Pretorius. It was in 1855 that Pretorius and his young friend Stoffel Snyman left the Transvaal with wagons and oxen to hunt big-game north of the Limpopo.

They left their wagons and oxen near Msilikazi's kraal and marched into the tsetse fly country at the head of a column of two hundred carriers. Their guides led them to a great waterfall, and there they camped. Eight days after their arrival they saw the smoke of another camp-fire and paid the newcomer a visit. He was David Livingstone, ill and hungry. Livingstone's natives had been reduced to roasting and grinding their rawhide shields for food. Pretorius and Snyman were able to give Livingstone provisions and medicine, and remained with him until he had recovered.

Snyman died in 1920, and he, too, was fond of relating this story of the discovery of the Falls. If you accept it, then why did Livingstone fail to mention his benefactors in his own narrative of the discovery? This is a puzzle indeed. I am reluctant to dismiss the Pretorius-Snyman account as pure imagination, for it rings true. The only possible explanation may do the great missionary explorer an injustice. I give it merely as an attempt to throw some light on a deep mystery.

Livingstone's main ambition was not to explore, but to rid Africa of slavery. He was seldom very friendly with the old Boer hunters, for he regarded some of them as enemies of the cause dear to his heart. Moreover, Livingstone deplored the wanton killing of game as a "form of insanity". Students of his travels must have noticed that Livingstone sometimes made scathing references or failed to mention certain white men he met in the wilds if he held those men in contempt. Nevertheless I find it hard to imagine a Christian gentleman such as Livingstone failing to place on record the sort of help

such as Pretorius and Snyman declared they had given him. Nor can I reconcile this incident with Livingstone's words, given in "Travels of a Missionary", on his great discovery: "It had never before been seen by European eyes." It is just possible, however, that Livingstone regarded as European only those who, like himself, were born in Europe.

When the early travellers reached the Victoria Falls, and for long afterwards, there were no natives living within sixty miles of the place. They feared an evil spirit, they said, which haunted the Falls. Cataract Island, on the lip of the falls, was once known as Devil's Island, and Coillard the missionary said of it: "The natives believe it is haunted by a malevolent and cruel divinity, and they make it offerings to conciliate its favour, a bead necklace, a bracelet or some other object, which they fling into the abyss, bursting into lugubrious incantations, quite in harmony with their dread and horror."

Many white men believe in a Victoria Falls "monster" that lives at the foot of the falls. Captain Reynard, the curator I have mentioned, told me that three men whose word he could not doubt had seen this creature.

Livingstone mentioned a serpent in these waters, and it is part of the Barotse folklore. Natives assured Livingstone that it was large enough to hold a canoe and prevent the paddlers from moving in any direction. According to fairly recent accounts it is thirty feet long with a small slate-grey head and thick black body which it exhibits in fold after fold.

Mr. V. Pare, for many years in charge of boats on the Zambesi, climbed down to the bottom of the Victoria Falls gorge in 1925, when the water was at the lowest ebb in living memory. That was the first time he set eyes on the monster. It was a

serpent-like creature, and when it saw Pare it reared up and then vanished into a deep cavern. Pare reported seeing it again, years afterwards, at the foot of the Devil's Cataract.

Natives call the monster Chipique and say that it came up from the ocean a thousand miles away. Native fishermen are so afraid of it that they will not venture out at night. "Chipique rules the river in the dark hours," point out the fishermen.

Mr. J. W. Soper, who has trapped and shot a great many crocodiles round about the Falls, has heard native reports of very large specimens. But it is unlikely that Mr. Pare would have failed to identify a crocodile. It may be a large python, of course, like the legendary "great snake" of the Orange River.

People tell you that a crazy pilot once flew a small aircraft under the Victoria Falls bridge. When I was a newspaper columnist I made an effort to trace this legend to its sources; and that brought to my office Mr. J. J. Jacobs of Johannesburg with authentic information.

It was in 1931 that Jacobs was flying with Pat Hollindrake of Nyasaland and Rhodesia Airways. They discussed the possibility of flying under the bridge, and in a foolhardy spirit they decided to attempt it next day. In the presence of a crowd of Easter holiday makers they narrowly escaped death.

"As soon as we passed over the main falls we thought we were going to crash," Mr. Jacobs recalled. "We were being sucked down. The 'pull' of the falls is so tremendous that there is no air to fly in. Hollindrake pulled back the joystick and opened the throttle full, and we missed the bridge by a few feet. The rumour spread that we had succeeded in flying under the bridge, and the rumour is often revived."

For a quarter of a century there has been an official ban on flying under the

Victoria Falls bridge. I doubt very much whether the pilot who breaks this rule will live to pay the fine. Up to now there have been few air fatalities in this neighbourhood. However, a large metal airscrew is to be seen over one grave in Livingstone cemetery. It is the grave of a pilot who saw the Victoria Falls for the first time more than twenty years ago. “I hate leaving this place,” remarked the pilot as he climbed into the cockpit for his departure. The air was lifeless that day, and the runway was too short. A few seconds later he was dead.

Some psychologists declare that the Victoria Falls throw a sinister influence over people who have a suicide complex. Sir Leopold Moore (chemist and printer in Livingstone in the early days) denied this theory. He pointed out that many thousands of visitors had wandered round the edges of the gorge, with only white-washed stones to mark the danger zones; yet deaths of any sort had been rare.

Before the Victoria Falls bridge was built the contractors were officially instructed to rig a safety net such as circus trapeze artists use. The net was placed in position. Then the native labourers went on strike. They imagined that they would be ordered to fall into the net, and they did not like the look of it! Only when the net was removed did they go back to work.

Rockets were used when the bridge construction was started, to hurl lines carrying a transporter cable from cliff to cliff. The bridge was built out simultaneously from both sides, meeting with perfect accuracy on April 1, 1905. Before the girders were placed in position, a canvas “bo’sun’s chair” was used to carry men and material over the gorge. M. Georges Imbault, the fearless chief construction engineer, made the first journey himself, as the bonus he had offered to the riggers had failed to produce a volunteer.

Imbault also carried out another nerve-racking task when the time came to clear away the steel rope and pulleys that hung below the bridge. A bonus was offered, but no workman would tackle the job. So Imbault was lowered on a small plank, and he worked with both hands to release the pulleys.

One day a girder slipped, killing a white mechanic and sending a native to his death in the Boiling Pot. Another man fell seventy feet from the bridge on to the sloping cliff. He survived, brought an action against his employers – and lost. Much dangerous work has been carried out on the bridge since then, but no one has been killed.

Men have fallen into the vortex at the foot of the Victoria Falls and lived. There is a tale, which may be no more than a legend, which goes back to the days when the bridge was under construction. I was told that a Trooper Ramsay of the Northern Rhodesia Police was paddling a canoe above the Falls during the flood season. He lost his paddle, and for seven miles the merciless current swept him downstream until he came to the lip of the Falls. There man and canoe parted company and dropped four hundred feet into the Boiling Pot. A policeman and several others watched the nerve-racking incident, then hurried down to the edge of the swirling waters. One man made a line fast round his waist, ventured into the Boiling Pot and gripped Ramsay as the current bore him past. Both men emerged alive and unharmed, thus ending happily a true story of magnificent courage and luck. Or so the story runs. I wish that some “Old Drifter” would confirm it.

One of the earliest tragedies of the Victoria Falls involving white people was the result of a canoe being overturned by a hippo. Two men, two women and a baby and the usual crew of black paddlers struggled in the swift stream above the Falls. Two of the white visitors were

drowned, but the baby was rescued by a paddler and restored to the mother. It is satisfactory to be able to record that the native was pensioned for life.

Mysterious indeed was the discovery of the body of a young man many years ago. There is a path leading to the aptly-named Knife Edge which only those with steady heads should take. Below this path the body was found, in a sitting position on a ledge of rock. It was thought the man had fallen through the deceptive undergrowth and bush, and had injured his spine. In his pockets were fifteen half-sovereigns and a railway ticket to Elisabethville in the Belgian Congo. But from that day to this his identity has never been established.

Among the lucky escapes at the Falls one must not forget the diner-out, an elderly man, who tried to follow the path from the bridge to the Livingstone Road one dark night. He lost his way, fell over the edge, and was caught by a tree before he had time to hurt himself seriously. Someone heard his shouts at daybreak and he was rescued, moaning over the loss of his false teeth and a bottle of whisky.

A naval seaman, on leave from the Africa Squadron between the wars was not so fortunate. During the dry season the Falls dwindle away and from a gigantic series of breaking waves they become a few thin streams. The doomed sailor set out one exceptionally dry year to cross the very edge of the Falls to Livingstone Island. He reckoned without the force of those mighty waters; for streams which appear as trickles at a distance are dangerous enough when you slip into them. The sailor put his weight on a shifting stone and was instantly lost. They found his body just below the surface within a foot of the great drop, wedged between rocks.

Only once have the Victoria Falls been featured in the newspapers of the world as the scene of a murder. That was in July 1930, when Mrs. Una Kirby of Pretoria

was attacked by a native and slipped over the edge in the struggle that followed.

Native troops were summoned immediately Mrs. Kirby's companion reported the crime, and an impassable cordon was thrown round the area. A strong guard was placed on the Victoria Falls Bridge. Late that night a native wearing torn, blood-stained clothing tried to break through the cordon at the bridge; and in his effort to escape arrest, he fell over the cliff. Two hundred feet down a rock stopped his progress. Corporal Jordan of the Northern Rhodesia Police was lowered over the edge, and brought the native back to safety. But the man, who was undoubtedly the murderer, died on the way to hospital.

Attempts to recover the body of Mrs. Kirby went on for weeks, and were finally successful. After a long search by land and air the body was located with the aid of powerful field glasses. Then three brave men were lowered in a specially constructed cage to the base of the Falls. Drenched in spray during the forty-minutes' descent, they reached the body and were hauled slowly back to the summit with their burden.

Thousands of South African visitors to the Victoria Falls read with regret of the death in 1937 of Percy M. Clark, that famous "Old Drifter" who sold native curios and photographs in picturesque huts beside the Zambesi. Percy Clark was one of those men whose deaths have been prematurely reported. It was in 1904 that this news reached Bulawayo as a result of a queer escapade.

Clark, accompanied by an engineer named Fox, decided to explore the gorge while the Victoria Falls bridge was being constructed. They were actually the first to reach the bottom from the southern bank. There they separated. Clark, exhausted by climbing, spent the night in the gorge. Fox, climbing alone, fell a hundred feet, broke his fall on a tree, and landed on a

ledge of rock. A rescue party brought him up with the aid of a crane. In the meantime Clark had been reported dead. He climbed back to safety and found that his friends had opened a bottle of whisky to mourn his loss.

Tales of heroism you hear at the Falls are true. One day two natives were wrecked in their canoe on an islet near the Eastern Cataract. The river was in full flood, and it seemed that they were hopelessly marooned and destined to die of starvation. However, Mr. Pare and Trooper Gerald Martin of the police stripped and set off in a large canoe with five native paddlers. It was a ten to one chance, but Pare's handling of the canoe brought it off and they returned safely with the castaways. Pare and Martin were awarded the British Empire Medal for this feat, and the five native paddlers shared a handsome sum subscribed by the people of Livingstone.

Great rescues were carried out during World War II, when high-spirited but too daring young men, stationed in Rhodesia for air training, attempted too much. One air cadet named Stanton tried to scale the four hundred and fifty foot precipice above the Boiling Pot. After climbing three hundred feet he found that he could not move in any direction, and there he remained for an hour before he was seen from the bridge.

Sergeants Pywell and Wordsworth of the police went to the rescue. Wordsworth tried to reach Stanton with a breeches-buoy and a rope ladder, but the ladder was too short. Pywell then went down in the breeches-buoy with a longer ladder. He was held up when the rope caught in a bush, but freed the ladder after a long struggle. When he had reached the limit of the rope, Pywell found that he was still thirty feet away from Stanton. Pywell then tried to swing the rope ladder across to

Stanton, like a trapeze artist; but every attempt fell short.

By this time the bridge was crowded with anxious spectators. They saw Stanton clinging to the cliff for his life; and they watched Pywell suspended about three hundred feet above the Boiling Pot, trying again and again to reach Stanton. Here was drama indeed, with the roar of the Victoria Falls providing grim music, the spray blowing across in gusts like a vivid stage effect, and the green precipice as backdrop.

Then a chill ran through the crowd. Men clutched the railing and many prayers were said when they saw Pywell climb out of the security of the breeches-buoy on to the rope ladder. With magnificent courage this sergeant of police turned himself into a human pendulum, swinging himself towards Stanton. At last Pywell made contact, put Stanton into the breeches-buoy and saw him hauled up the cliff. Only then did Pywell return to safety. Never was the bronze medal of the Royal Humane Society more richly deserved.

One night in February 1955 a Mr. Alan Perry went out with a party from the hotel to see the lunar rainbow over the Eastern Cataract. That night Perry survived a longer and more painful ordeal, I think, than any other Victoria Falls accident victim.

He was talking to his companions at the edge of the cliff when suddenly he found himself in mid-air. To this day Perry does not know whether he slipped or lost his sense of balance. He struck a tree or bush about one hundred and fifty feet down and broke his fall. The impact was so severe, however, that he also broke all his ribs down one side.

Perry, an ex-soldier and racing motorist, kept his nerve even in that ghastly situation. Looking down, he saw the river hundreds of feet below. He knew that he

must find a more secure perch. So in spite of intense pain and shock he managed to claw his way up about twelve feet to a narrow ledge. He realised that he might faint; however, he was able to use his scarf to tie himself to a tree stump. Torches and car headlamps played on the cliff, but only at dawn was Perry able to signal to his rescuers and show them that he had not fallen into the gorge.

The rescuers on this occasion were Dr. R. E. Dunn, a government medical officer, and Mr. J. V. Tebbitt, a game ranger. They climbed down the precipice boldly with a rope ladder, ropes and a stretcher. It was a perilous manoeuvre in every way. One of the large stones dislodged by the stretcher hit Perry on the head; all the others passed over him. Then the rescuers got to their man, Dunn injected morphia, and they strapped him into the stretcher. Perry had been in danger for ten hours when he was hauled slowly to the top of the cliff. In ten hours he had aged ten years.

"Mosi-oa-Tunya!" What tales are in your mighty voice. Will that thunder ever be stilled? The natives say that three hundred years ago the Falls were in a different place. Air photographs show two lines of weakness radiating from the great cleft in the Western Cataract. This erosion suggests that sometime in the future the present line of the Falls will be altered. Fifty or a hundred years hence South Africa may no longer draw travellers from the farthest corners of the earth to experience the wonder that Livingstone felt as he stared awe-struck at the torrent which he named in honour of his Queen.



Chapter 13
SARIE MARAIS

O bring my terug na die ou Transvaal,
Daar waar my Sarie woon,
Daar onder in die mielies by the groen doringboom,
Daar woon my Sarie Marais.

IN MY Africana collection there is an early copy of that famous song, presented to me by Mr. Justice N. J. de Wet, at one time Officer Administering the Union Government. He told me the true story of Sarie Marais.

Some regard the heroine of the song as a mysterious figure. Certainly the identity of Sarie Marais once aroused a vigorous controversy in South Africa. You may be surprised to hear that Sarie Marais was a real woman, but there is no doubt about that. I hope that I shall not stir up any further argument now by putting the facts before you.

One school of thought claimed a Mr. J. P. Toerien, born in Paarl in 1859, as the author of the words, and it was said that his wife, Susara Margaretha Maré composed the song. Toerien was a fervent Afrikaans pioneer, a frequent contributor of verse to the first Afrikaans magazines, which were published in Paarl. His pen name was Jepete. He was musical, and among his efforts was an attempt to write a South African national anthem.

Toerien settled in Pretoria and earned his living as a journalist. There he met his wife, and obviously she inspired a great deal of his later poetry, as her name

occurs again and again. It was claimed that Toerien wrote “Sarie Marais” in her honour. The printer is supposed to have altered the spelling of Maré to Marais by mistake. According to the Toerien claimants, the song was written before the South African War.

Toerien died in 1920, but Mrs. Toerien lived to the age of seventy-three, and died in 1939 in Bloemfontein. Two years before her death a newspaper sent a journalist to ask her whether she was the original Sarie Marais of the song. It is said that Mrs. Toerien first admitted that she was, but published a strong denial soon - afterwards. She was a modest, religious woman who disliked personal publicity. When she died, some newspapers described her as the woman who inspired the song. She had sixteen children, and those who are still alive are convinced that their mother was the original Sarie Marais. Toerien’s manuscript with the first version of the song is supposed to have perished in a fire.

The story of Sarie Marais which I accept begins in 1902, when Mrs. Ella de Wet was anxious to join her husband in the field. De Wet was on the staff of General Louis Botha, then operating in ‘Natal. It is pleasant to find evidence of little wartime courtesies long ago. Lord Kitchener passed Mrs. de Wet through the lines so that she could join her husband. They spent three weeks together on a farm in the Vryheid district. There was a piano, and Mrs. de Wet played the accompaniments at the evening singsongs. There the Sarie Marais song was born.

Before that, the men of the commandos had been singing “Ella Rhee”, an American negro song of the Civil War period.

Sweet Ella Rhee, so dear to me,
Is lost for evermore
Her home was down in Tennessee

Before the cruel war.

"Ella Rhee", also known as "Carry me back to Tennessee", was composed by Septimus Winner. Mrs. de Wet based the music of the 1902 version of Sarie Marais on "Ella Rhee". She found it in an American album (for there were few Afrikaans songs at that period), and made no claim to originality in the music.

At first not only the music but also the words bore some resemblance to "Ella Rhee". Two verses were hammered out by the happy party round the farm-house piano, everyone making suggestions. The original verses ran as follows:

My Sarie Mare is so ver van my hart,
Om haar nooit weer te sien,
Sy het in die wyk van die Mooi Rivier gewoon,
Voordat die oorlog begin.
O neem my terug na die ou Transvaal,
Daar waar my Sarie woon.

Daar onder in die mielies by die groen doring boom,
Daar woon my Sarie Mare.

You have noted the spelling Sarie Mare. The company round the piano selected the name of the mother of a beloved *veld-prediker,* the Rev. Paul Nel, as the heroine of the song.

So the original Sarie Marais was the Sarie Mare of Uitenhage who married Louis Jacobus Nel of the farm Welgegund, Natal. She had made the long and adventurous trek from Uitenhage with her brother Paul to visit her uncle, Oom Wynand Mare, near Greytown. And when a young farmer Louis Jacobus Nel rode over to call, they fell in love at once and became engaged a few weeks later. Sarie was seventeen when they were married.

Owing to the distance they had dispensed with the traditional *ouersvra* ritual, so now they set off by ox-wagon for Uitenhage to receive the parental blessing.

That was in the late eighteen-fifties, but already a photographer had started a business in Pietermaritzburg, and there is a treasured photograph in the family album of Sarie in her wedding-dress.

After the visit to the Cape, which lasted a full year in those leisurely days, they settled on the Nel farm. Sarie died in 1877 at the age of thirty-seven, at the birth of her eleventh child. She was buried on Welgegund. Her son Paul became minister of the Dutch Reformed Church at Jeppestown, Johannesburg, and many of the men of General Louis Botha's forces belonged to this congregation. According to Mrs. Janie A. Malherbe, a grand-daughter of Sarie Mare Nel, the Rev. Paul Nel was the first Voortrekker descendant to become a minister. During the South African War he was in great demand round the camp fires of the commandos. He talked to the men of the early days of Natal, stories he had heard from his father; and he told them of his mother Sarie Mare, her journey and her romance.

Such was the heroine of the song. "I am not at all certain how far the words were my wife's, and how far they were made up by the members of General Botha's staff," Mr. Justice de Wet wrote to me. "The men who could throw light on this subject – Louis Esselen, Dick van Velden and others – have all passed away. The song was the product of the war."

Mr. Justice de Wet became Minister of Justice in the Union Cabinet in 1913, which meant spending part of the winter in Cape Town. Mrs. de Wet told her friends long afterwards that her exile at the Cape aroused her longings for the Transvaal and reminded her of the song. She set to work on an improved version of "Sarie Mare". One day in 1915, when Professor Leo Fouche was staying with the De Wets at Groote Schuur Avenue, she sang and played it to him. (Fouche was professor of history at Witwatersrand

University, but he was also interested in music.) She invited Fouche's criticism, and he made a number of suggestions. By this time the music differed considerably from "Ella Rhee". The song had lost some of its pathos; in fact, it was a merry effort. Americans failed to detect its "Ella Rhee" descent.

The process of polishing the song and music went on for years. Miss Ellaline Roos supplied a third verse, based on part of another song called "Upington se Strand", and running as follows:

Ek was so bang dat die kakies my sou vang
En ver oor die see wegstuur
Toe vlug ek na die kant van die Upington se strand,
Daar onder langs die Groot Rivier.

Up to this time the song was not widely known. Only a few copies were available, hand-written by Mrs. de Wet and given to a few close friends. These copies, if they still exist, would be valuable pieces of Africana today.

General Smuts persuaded Mrs. de Wet to publish the song, and the first sheets appeared with the music in 1920, bearing the imprint of Darter's, Cape Town. The title was Sarie Mare (not Marais). Other firms published imitations, and the title became Sarie Marais.

Mrs. de Wet never liked the verse which began: *"Ek was so bang dat die kakies sal my vang."* It suggested a timid character. In the second edition, therefore, she altered it, as follows:

O altyd was sy bang dat die kakies my sou vang
En ver oor die groot vlei stuur,
Of sit my in 'n skip en stuur vir my 'n trip,
Ver van die Mooi-rivier.

This edition also included a final verse, ending on a happy note:

Verlossing het gekom en huis-toe gaan was daar,
Terug na die ou Transvaal
My liefling persoon sal seker ook daar syn
Om my met ‘n kus te onthaal.

When you sum up all the changes in words and music, “Sarie Marais” is sufficiently different to be regarded as a South African product. Thousands look upon it as the richest jewel in our own treasury of song.

Once, and only once that I can remember, “Sarie Marais” was attacked by an Afrikaans music-critic in Cape Town. “Sarie Marais is not our own,” he declared in a newspaper article. “There are people who make out that she is our own. They are the people who delight in showing the world what South Africa can produce in the way of music. They are doing us more harm than good. Our people have more and better songs than `Sarie Marais’. That this song has captured the great bulk of our people and still fascinates them today is not to be doubted, but I am not going to test the musical taste of our people by that majority. `Sarie Marais’ has served her time. I am asking my readers to do everything in their power to kill `Sarie Marais’. She must be murdered. “

I discussed this outburst with several musicians, including the late Mr. William J. Pickerill, then musical director of the Cape Town Orchestra. Pickerill was an admirer of “Sarie Marais”. He considered it superior to most of the *piekniek liedjies.* And he remarked wisely: “Nothing is more likely to give a song a long life than attempts to kill it.” Pickerill also explained to me that there were only twelve semi-tones in the music; thus it would be remarkable if the song did not have points of similarity to other songs.

The man who denounced Sarie was a good musician, but he was a poor psychologist. Pickerill was right. However, “Sarie Marais” was not an

instantaneous success when the first music sheets were printed in 1920. The public response was slow, and between 1920 and 1937 only four thousand copies of Mrs. de Wet's version were sold. I believe that the turning point came when controversy over the authorship revealed the fact that Sarie Marais was no mythical figure but a real personality.

Incidentally, the Susara Margaretha Mare (Mrs. Toerien), whose name I have mentioned, was a distant relative of Sarie Mare of Uitenhage. If you are still wondering why I am so emphatic in rejecting the claims made on behalf of the Toeriens, please study Mrs. Toerien's own disclaimer. Mrs. Janie Malherbe looked it up in the files of the Bloemfontein "Volksblad". Here is a translation: "I am not that Sarie. I do not like the song and my husband never wrote it. If he had done so I would have known about it, as he showed me everything he ever wrote."

One point which still mystifies me a little was an incident during the visit of the Steele-Payne Bellringers to Graaff-Reinet in 1918. (I suppose only middle-aged and older readers will remember this famous company of musicians who toured South Africa. for so many years.) A schoolmaster approached Claude Steele, gave him a book of school songs, and requested him to play one of the songs at the next show. It was "Sarie Marais". Claude Steele adapted it for the bells, and it was a great success. Evidently some unknown and forgotten music-lover produced a version which found its way into print some time before Mrs. de Wet's printed version. Mrs. de Wet's position as the original composer (aided by friends during and after the South African War) remains secure.

Mrs. de Wet was a good pianist. Apart from her most famous achievement she composed words and music for the Afrikaans songs "Moederlief", "Die Vaal

Hare en Bloue Oë" and "Het Jy Vergeet? "

"Sarie Marais" has been translated into English, French and Italian, and towards the end of World War II it was reported that a Russian version had been prepared for the army! (O bring me back to old Moscow.)

Perhaps the song still touches the deepest human feelings when the singers are far from South Africa. At home it is a jolly dance tune. In exile, "Sarie Marais" is the very essence of the longing which a homesick South African knows when he thinks of the land of his birth.

I know an Afrikaner who made a memorable voyage in a small yacht from Table Bay to Panama. He named her Sarie Marais (how well I remember that ceremony) and in metal letters under her counter appeared the stirring words: *"Bring ons terug na die ou Transvaal."* They got back all right, but without the yacht.



Chapter 14
EARTHQUAKE FEELING

EARTHQUAKES RARELY come my way. For years it fell to my lot to rush out and report fires and floods, shattered trains, shipwrecks and crashed aircraft, accidents caused by man and the less predictable convulsions of Nature. I have felt earthquake shocks in Burma and Egypt; but when I had to write an earthquake story in Cape Town, it usually meant no more than a visit to the seismograph at the university.

The line on this seismograph was seldom absolutely "flat", for this sensitive instrument recorded the breaking of the seas on the Cape beaches. But when I went to the university with news of a serious Japanese earthquake, there were jagged sweeps up and down the paper.

If you are afraid of earthquakes, South Africa is one of the safest areas on the uneasy crust of this earth. Only keep out of Zululand. You may be surprised to learn that South Africa feels an earthquake of the fifth degree, or higher, at the rate of one a year. And in 1932 there was a tenth degree earthquake on the sea-floor close to Zululand, causing widespread alarm and damage.

Earthquakes fall into twelve classes, starting with imperceptible 'quakes which can be recorded only by instruments, and ending with major catastrophes in which every human structure is destroyed. India had one in which three hundred thousand lives were lost. I have been through the

South African records without discovering a single death caused by an earthquake. This is remarkable when you consider that the ninth degree shocks experienced in Zululand are classed as “highly destructive”. Van Riebeeck had no ’quakes to enter in his diary, but he did mention his pleasure in their absence. He had seen enough devastation in the East Indies. Simon van der Stel, in 1695, gave the first recorded description of a South African earthquake. This was in Cape Town, and he wrote: “In the evening of September 4, between seven and eight, weather clear and calm, without a breath of wind, a heavy earthquake was felt, which created a loud noise in the foundations of the earth, as if it were a passing roll of thunder. It lasted so long that one hundred might have been counted. The natives declared that they had never before heard or felt anything of the kind.”

Of course the Cape Town ’quake that everyone has read about was the 1809 shock when the soldiers of the garrison hurried out of their barracks “naked and tumbling over each other in their haste”. They remembered their discipline on the Parade and formed up in two ranks, but still with hardly a kilt or breeches among the lot of them.

William Burchell the botanist, the most pleasant and intelligent Cape traveller of his day, gave an account of that ’quake. He described the consternation, people abandoning their houses and pitching tents on the squares and in gardens. “Some persons lived in that manner for more than a fortnight, impressed with the idea that the end of the world had come,” Burchell wrote. “Many attended divine service in the churches and meeting-houses for the first time in their lives, and all business was neglected for a few days.”

Burchell was in Cape Town when another ’quake was felt two years later. The nerves of the people of Cape Town were

still on edge. “I have known a whole party, in the midst of their conviviality, to fly precipitately out of the house upon one of the guests happening in a convivial mood to dance across a floor overhead and cause it to shake,” Burchell remarked. “There were two shocks on a fine day in the forenoon. The first was like the report of a cannon and the second like the loudest peal of thunder. In the fright that ensued I believe that every inhabitant of Cape Town who could move rushed out of the houses.” Some days later there was another shock and a hollow rumbling sound like a smothered howling passed underfoot with a strong trembling of the earth.

In a “Government Gazette” dated December 4, 1835, I found details of an early attempt to make a scientific study of earthquakes. There had been a mild shock in Cape Town and the neighbourhood during the night of the previous November 11. Out at the observatory Sir Thomas Maclear and others were working all night; they felt nothing, but heard a sound like a cannon. The “Gazette” published this advertisement: “Any gentlemen, country agents and others, who can give any information relative to the late ’quake are asked to communicate with the committee of the South African Scientific and Literary Institute. J. C. Close, honorary secretary.”

All through last century you find records of mild shocks in Cape Town and the platteland. Durban was shaken to its foundations in 1860, and there was a sound (well-known to ’quake observers) like heavy wagons passing quickly along a hard road. Ten years later people living near the Table Bay waterfront were staggered when they saw the water rise four feet in ten minutes, only to fall again suddenly. This event was repeated fifteen minutes later. It was due to an upheaval of the ocean bed, where many of the world’s earthquakes originate. People wrote to the

newspapers recalling that a similar phenomenon had occurred a quarter of a century earlier; and on that occasion so many fish were flung on shore that convicts working at the Amsterdam Battery had to spend all their time collecting and burying fish.

Shortly before midnight on May 10, 1885 there was a severe earthquake shock in Cape Town. A ship loaded with gunpowder was at anchor in Table Bay, and many people thought she had blown up. Caledon, Paarl and Wellington were all shaken.

Port Shepstone, which lies in the mild danger area of South Africa, experienced a ’quake in 1894 which destroyed the German Lutheran Church. About a year later there was a mild shock in Durban, and one amusing sidelight is on record. Hundreds of people living on the Berea looked under their beds, imagining that the movement had been caused by an intruder.

It may have been pure coincidence, but the whole of Namaqualand felt a severe earthquake on the very day, December 28, 1908, that the seaport of Messina in Sicily was destroyed. Nearly one hundred thousand people died in Sicily that day; forty villages were wiped out; within seven thousand square miles few buildings remained standing. Certainly a major catastrophe, force twelve on the scale. But I doubt whether it reached more than force five in Namaqualand, the point where most sleepers are aroused, loose objects fall over, and furniture moves.

One of the heaviest earth tremors ever recorded in the Union occurred on February 20, 1912, and every part of the country felt it. Scientists were not as skilled in tracing origins of shocks as they are today, but the astronomers thought the “epicentre” was somewhere in the Kalahari. Later they decided it was at Koffiefontein, O.F.S., where the damage was greatest. (All the buildings on the

farm Steenkraal were razed.) Buildings cracked at Vryburg, Kimberley rocked. Thousands of tons of loose ground round the Kimberley mine fell into the crater, raising alarming clouds of dust. Watercourses in the district were diverted, some springs dried up, and a few loosely-built farmhouses collapsed. Mr. H. E. Wood, the astronomer, watched his seismographs in Johannesburg and saw the pin of one instrument jerked out of place by the violence of the shock. “The tremor went on so long that I could hardly realise that it was an earthquake,” Mr. Wood declared. “It was outside my experience of earthquakes. It seemed as though people were walking about over my head.”

Just over forty years ago the Union Government appointed a Witwatersrand Earth Tremors Committee composed of Mr. Robert Kotze, Mr. R. T. A. Innes (the Union Astronomer) and Mr. D. Wilkinson, a mining engineer. The object was to discover the cause of the shocks which had been causing some alarm on the Rand for the past seven or eight years. Some people imagined that the earth would open and swallow them up. Many jerry-built houses had been damaged. In one district where tremors often occurred, people had packed up and left.

The committee decided that “a sufficient and sole cause” of these shocks lay in the mining that had taken place. They were not proper earthquakes, but man-made tremors. Pillars were left in old workings, and when these collapsed the tremors were felt. Nowadays the mines fill in with sand, or some other more effective packing.

Johannesburg still notices hundreds of these shocks every year, but only the newcomer bothers about them. Flat-dwellers living high up in the centre of the city often say that they feel the buildings “swaying” in a tremor. Imagination, however, plays a part here. Though a

heavy tremor may be unpleasant while it lasts, the experts agree that there is no danger of the damage which follows a real earthquake.

Tremor freaks do sometimes occur along the Rand. I heard of a man who was trapped in the bathroom of an eighth floor flat until a locksmith released him. Window panes break, lamps splinter and deep cracks appear in gardens. During a very severe tremor in 1944, hundreds of plate-glass shop-windows were shattered and a chimney-stack fell.

I told you to keep out of Zululand if you dislike earthquakes. And indeed the ’quake that occurred there on the last day of 1932 must have remained as a disturbing memory in the minds of all who went through the full shock. Two government geologists, Dr. L. J. Krige and Dr. F. A. Venter, were sent to Zululand to study the effects, and so there is a reliable report of the phenomenon. The epicentre, as I said, was on the sea-floor; the geologists fixed it twenty-five miles to the east of Cape St. Lucia. A total area of about three hundred thousand square miles was shaken. Johannesburg felt it distinctly three hundred miles away, and it was also observed at Koster in the Western Transvaal. On the coast, the effects were noted all the way from Port Shepstone to the Portuguese border.

No doubt there would have been more serious damage, and possibly loss of life, if the St. Lucia area had been densely populated. As it was, the lonely coastal dunes seemed to have absorbed most of the shock and protected the few isolated people living near the shore. This was the “ninth degree” area, but all that happened along the remote and rocky seashore was the disturbance of pebbles. Black muddy fountains were seen at certain points near the shore, with lumps of black clay shooting into the air; and there was a sound like underground thunder.

On the dunes nearly four hundred feet above sea level stood the iron tower of the Cape St. Lucia lighthouse. One keeper, Murphy, appointed when it was built in 1905, served there continuously, apart from spells of leave, for nearly thirty years. At the time of the earthquake the only means of transport to the lighthouse was the ox-wagon. It is wild country, where hippos still send their deep, booming calls over the lagoons, and crocodiles lurk in the marshes.

Murphy made the lighthouse garden the prettiest along the whole coast, a replica of an old English coastguard station. Among the Zulus he gained a tremendous reputation both as a judge in disputes and as a doctor. But it was a quiet life for Murphy and his wife, and the earthquake must have formed the most sensational incident of his long career.

When the earthquake came the tower shook violently, gas cylinders were pitched from their casings and began leaking, lamp and lenses were thrown out of position, and all the mechanism stopped. Tools fell from benches and tables, water-tanks were damaged, long fissures appeared in the earth. Murphy had all day to repair the damage, but he was hampered by further shocks. Often he thought the iron tower would not stand the strain. Nevertheless, when evening came the St. Lucia light was burning bravely.

Murphy’s wooden frame-house stood half a mile from the shore. Mrs. Murphy reported that the shock had thrown her off the sofa, and that all the crockery was smashed. Otherwise their home was safe, cushioned by the thick buffer of sand.

Elsewhere in Zululand white people were frightened and natives were sure that the end of the world had come. One fissure in the earth ran for two miles, cracked a railway embankment near Mtubatuba, and derailed a train. At a sugar mill near the Umfolosi river columns of water like geysers shot into the air. Many walls were

cracked and some houses had to be abandoned. Water in the Nyalazi river seemed to be boiling. Trees and shrubs bent for three minutes as though they were feeling the force of a hurricane. Goods fell from the shelves of stores. Water tanks burst.

The motor vessel Gujarat, which was passing the Tugela river mouth at the time of the 'quake, shook violently for two minutes. Her master reported that the sea appeared to be trembling. Ships in Durban harbour also felt the shock and strained at their moorings.

Church bells tolled in Greytown though no one touched the ropes. Clocks stopped, lamps and birdcages swung, tiles were shaken loose, stationary motor-cars and railway trucks rocked on their wheels. Pumpkins rolled off roofs. Every house in Vryheid rattled, but the men working in the coal-mine were unaware that anything had happened. Earthquake shocks are always weaker underground.

Machadodorp in the Eastern Transvaal has a hot radio-active sulphur spring. During the 'quake the flow of water increased and the temperature rose. The ground heaved at Newcastle in Natal, while pictures fell from the walls in Harrismith.

When the authorities in the Union compared notes afterwards with foreign observatories they found that the Zululand earthquake had been recorded as far away as Finland and California. In other words, half the earth's surface had been affected. Ever since that experience people in Zululand have been advised to build with strong bricks and mortar. Moreover, they have been warned that earthquakes must be expected from time to time; and as high buildings are dangerous in earthquake zones, houses of one storey are recommended.

Experts believe that the eastern half of the Union appears to be more liable to earthquake shocks than the western. On

the other hand there are few observers in the sparsely-populated areas, and so the opinion may have to be revised. Namaqualand, as I have said, has known the earthquake feeling. Prieska shook in 1943, and people reported a loud rumble in the air as though an express train was thundering over the mountains. There is a classic geological fault at Worcester, so that tremors are felt there occasionally.

Earthquakes and volcanoes work together, companions of catastrophe. Fortunately all South Africa's volcanoes are extinct. There is a prehistoric volcano at Thaba Nchu in the Orange Free State; volcanic ash and petrified lava are to be found all over the mountain. Parts of South West Africa, too, are clearly volcanic. Indications have been found at Brukkaros in the south, Windhoek and Walvis Bay. Natives of the Herero race give each year a name, not a number, according to dramatic events and personalities. Long ago these names were recorded. Hereros referred to the year 1843 as "the year of the rushing sound", and this is believed to have been the roar of an earthquake.

South West Africa's "earthquake man" is Mr. E. Zelle, a scientist I always visit when I am in Windhoek. (He is in charge of the museum now, and a more interesting lecturer on the country, its people and animals you could not wish to meet.) Mr. Zelle kept earthquake records from 1911 to 1938. There were more than two hundred tremors during that period, most of them weak. "Seismicity", as it is called, occurs mainly in the escarpment region, the belt of activity running through Windhoek from north to south. The coast, and the Kalahari region in the east, seem to be almost immune from shocks.

South Africa's most violent earthquakes and volcanic eruptions occurred millions of years ago, before even the types of animals with which we are familiar had evolved. Far down in the earth carbon was crystallised and forced to the surface.

Thus the diamonds were formed. South Africa is now too solid to yield to these convulsions. Our immunity from dangerous ’quakes is due to the stability given by a granite basement.

Let me add that I have studied many earthquake reports without finding a parallel to a personal experience of a tremor in Cairo. When this mild ’quake occurred I was in my bathroom at the Continental-Savoy Hotel, and an electric chandelier on a chain began swinging overhead. I could not account for it, and imagined that I was suffering from a fainting attack. As I am not liable to such attacks, and as I remained conscious, I looked for some other reason and decided it must be an earthquake. The newspaper that evening confirmed my guess.

I cannot understand the mentality of people who spend their lives in zones of catastrophic earthquakes, and I never wish to find myself in anything more serious than I felt in that Cairo bathroom.



Chapter 15
RUMOURS NEVER DIE

The flying rumours gather'd as they roll'd,
Scarce any tale was sooner heard than told;
And all who told it added something new,
And all who heard it made enlargements too.

Pope. "The Temple of Fame."

NO RUMOUR is so incredible that some people will not believe it. As a journalist I had to follow many a rumour, sometimes discovering that "where there is smoke there is fire". I do not know whether South Africa is a land peculiarly inclined to listen eagerly to rumour; but certainly there have been memorable rumours.

How do rumours start? Why are human beings so anxious to pass on and discuss rumours? I can still remember the dramatic rumours of World War I, when Cape Town seethed with stories of the German aeroplane that had been "seen" over the city at night, and the spies who had landed at Cape Point from a German raider.

Seldom is a rumour entirely fantastic. Those rumours I have mentioned were possible, if not probable. They happened to be untrue. People still write to the newspapers quoting the rumours of long ago and asking whether the facts have been established. Some rumours never die. Certain rumours, like the great mysteries of crime, demand an explanation. If none comes, it is like a detective novel with the last chapter missing. And the fog of war leaves hidden

the scraps of truth in many a fascinating rumour.

Comparatively few people are strong enough to resist the impulse to pass on a rumour. This impulse exists in ordinary times, when you have interesting pieces of confidential news or a good story to tell. In war-time the impulse often becomes over powering. You may find yourself spreading the rumour not only among friends but among strangers. But you simply must share it.

This is explained by the fact that reserve breaks down in times of crisis. Camaraderie increases far above normal. The common interest or danger draws people together, and all find relief in the discussion of the situation which involves them all. No wonder war-time rumours move rapidly.

The actual basis of the desire to pass on the rumour is held by some psychologists to be due to the desire to assert one's superiority by revealing information of which the other person is ignorant. Other authorities say that rumour-mongering merely reveals the desire to be equal, to share in the excitement all are feeling.

Rumours find unhesitating acceptance only with people without critical faculties. The educated man will be cynical, or slightly cheered, or uneasy as a result of a rumour. He will not believe it before he has devised some sort of test. The frame of mind is negative, somewhere between belief (which leads to action) and positive disbelief. Here is a wide field of research for the "mass observation" experts.

Rumours, false or true, are more often depressing than cheerful. If there is definite reason to expect good news, of course, then an encouraging rumour may arise. But it is natural that something which so often has its origin in fear and ignorance should become an alarming rumour.

Humanity dislikes suspense. Everyone tries to peer into the future, seeking easy explanations of riddles yet unsolved. If you have a burning question which lacks an answer, someone is bound to invent the answer – that mysterious rumour which causes more eager discussion than the truth.

India probably circulates more rumours than any other country in the world. The "bazaar rumour" of India takes its place in the country's news services. It cannot be ignored, for millions are chattering about it. Solid and reliable newspapers like the Calcutta "Statesman" print "bazaar rumours" for what they are worth. I was surprised to find this procedure, and I asked a member of the "Statesman" staff for the reason. "Bazaar rumours sometimes prove correct, and contain news well ahead of the official telegrams," was the reply. "It has been found impossible to trace the origins of bazaar rumours."

While I was in Calcutta in 1936 I saw the "bazaar rumour" at work, a striking example. I was strolling down the crowded Chowringhee when a newsboy offered my companion an evening newspaper. This was a thin and wretchedly edited native sheet, regarded by the white people as poor value for money. My careful companion glanced first at the Stop Press column, then rejected the newspaper in disgust. "A bazaar rumour states that King Edward VIII is about to abdicate," he informed me. "I am not going to pay one anna for rubbish like that." Several days later came the first published news of the events leading up to the abdication. The bazaars were right that time.

Wars, earthquakes and other disasters are responsible for the most numerous and the most widespread rumours. The rumour must have "group interest" before it can spread. The mere process of spreading is bound to cause distortion, so that one

looks for a grain of truth rather than complete verification of a sensational rumour.

Before the days of the cable, Cape Town stood to arms again and again when hostile fleets were reported to be approaching Table Bay to bombard the town. Signal guns were fired from the Castle, passed on by the Tygerberg cannon to Stellenbosch and Paarl. Burgher commandos saddled and rode for Cape Town to reinforce the defenders.

Not long ago I was offered a copy of a proclamation Major General David Baird issued as Acting Governor shortly after the Second British Occupation of the Cape. (I collect rumours, but £15 for a single sheet printed at the Castle in 1806 was too much for me.) Baird pointed out that some "ill-advised and malicious persons" had spread false reports about the arrival of an enemy fleet. One man had not only repeated the rumour in Baird's presence, but had stated that he had seen the hostile fleet at Saldanha Bay and had spoken to some of the officers.

Baird warned the public that in future anyone convicted of spreading or repeating false rumours would suffer death, or such other punishment as the general court martial might award. And he added: "Cornelis Maas, the person who in such a wanton and wicked manner gave the false information above mentioned, is to be flogged round the town in the most public and exemplary manner, tomorrow at noon, by the common executioner, and will afterwards be transported out of the colony."

I knew a police officer in South West Africa in the nineteen-twenties who was given the task of tracing rumours of a serious rebellion among the Hereros. Magistrates had reported that their districts in the north were seething with unrest.

The officer first interviewed the district surgeon of Otjiwarongo, a German doctor who had been through the Herero war early in the century. The doctor stated that he knew all the signs, and that the Hereros were on the point of rising. Farther north, in Outjo, the farmers had gathered in the village and were demanding troops and military aircraft. Many white families were on the road, making for centres where they would find some protection. But no one could give the officer definite information.

At last the officer found an old English woman, member of a well-known family, living in poverty on a lonely farm. She gave him information which led to the heart of the matter. It came out that a German, who had a native mistress, had deserted her and gone to Angola, leaving a destitute family. The embittered woman made all sorts of threats, and sent a messenger to the German telling him to return at once or he would be killed by her relatives. Some white farmer heard of this, and cross-examined the messenger. This native, possibly to save his face, or for some other reason of his own, declared that the Hereros were planning a revolt. The farmers immediately sent a runner to the nearest magistrate with a warning. Very soon the whole northern territory was in a state of alarm. Fortunately the government held its hand, the police officer exploded the rumour, and within a few days everything was normal.

Psychologists declare that the most promising field in which to spread a rumour is one in which the population is suffering from fear. It is easy to understand the feelings of people living in isolation on a frontier, among natives who have, within living memory, attacked and massacred the white settlers. But it is far more remarkable to discover a similar panic in the old, settled, peaceful Cape districts of a century ago.

According to rumours in the platteland in 1851, the coloured people had organised a rebellion. On a certain day all the white males in the country would be killed. So persistent were the rumours that the government offered a reward of one thousand pounds for information which would secure the conviction of the leaders of the conspiracy. Moreover, an official commission was sent into the country to investigate the alarming reports which magistrates and others were sending to Cape Town.

Even in D'Urban village (now Durbanville), only a few hours from Cape Town by post-coach, the tension was so great that most of the white families slept in one house every night while the men went out on patrol. Farther away from town the precautions were more stringent. About two hundred people assembled in an armed camp on the farm of Field Cornet Lochner in the Malmesbury district. Every farmer carried a gun. Wellington residents cloaked their defence measures by arranging a "raffle" for clothing; but the competitors had to bring their rifles and shoot for the prizes. It was said that the convicts at work on Bain's Kloof were to be released to take part in the revolution, and so Wellington made feverish preparations. The rumours spread as far afield as Riversdale in the east and Clanwilliam and the Hantam in the north. Everywhere the farmers laid in stocks of gunpowder and bullets.

Some farmers dismissed their coloured labourers in the midst of the harvest and engaged armed white men at higher wages. Many families abandoned their farm homesteads at night and camped in a different part of the farm so that they could not be located easily on the night of the rising. Various dates were given for the massacre. Some said there would be a simultaneous attack during the harvest, when the largest numbers of coloured people were at work on the farms. Others

believed the crisis would come on December 1, anniversary of the abolition of slavery. Finally there were many who feared bloodshed on Christmas Day.

Thus magistrates in the affected areas received one deputation after another, and every field cornet wrote in with alarming rumours. It was suggested in Worcester that a census should be taken of all faithful men, white and coloured, over the age of sixteen and able to carry arms, and that all suitable riding horses, saddles, bridles, guns and ammunition should be listed. A house to house search of the whole coloured population was another scheme put forward.

Among the coloured people there was also a strong sense of impending danger. They were influenced by a rumour that a deputation of farmers had gone to Cape Town to appeal for the restoration of slavery. Not many coloured men owned firearms, but large numbers lashed their scythe blades to poles.

Anxiety in Cape Town may be gauged from a speech made by the Attorney General at a Legislative Council meeting on November 10 that year. “I do not think I am in much danger sitting in the shadow of Table Mountain, and I am ready to take my chance,” announced the Attorney General. “Nevertheless, I should incur a grave moral responsibility if I did anything to influence the ignorant coloured people, or lead a frightened or irritated farmer to shoot someone dead. The first shot must be followed by a thousand others.”

This was the period of the Eighth Kaffir War (1850-53), when large numbers of Hottentots in the Eastern Province joined the Kaffirs against the British forces. Hottentot levies were employed by the British, and the first of these troops were returning to the Western Province and Clanwilliam late in 1851, their term of service having expired. No doubt these men contributed towards the general

uneasiness. Freed from discipline, elated by their military achievements, and with money to spend in the canteens, the Hottentot ex-soldiers caused disturbances as they passed through the countryside bound for their homes.

It was said that the rebellious Hottentots on the frontier had approached the men of their own race in British uniform and had tried to seduce them. The idea had been sown that the Hottentots were an oppressed race, inheritors of the soil yet owning no land. Such was the drunken gossip of the coloured canteens, and it served to strengthen the rumours. Small wonder an atmosphere of suspicion and jealousy was created. “The farmers have a smouldering fear of the coloured classes,” ran one official report. “Among the coloured people there is a universal desire to recover their land. They also suspect a revival of slavery or that they will be oppressed by vagrant laws.”

Vagrancy had become a menace in parts of the Cape Colony at that time, and the government was preparing to take steps against squatters on Crown land. These people, some white, mainly coloured, lived in the mountains and other inaccessible places. Mr. Matthew Blake, a Caledon farmer, reported that while travelling in the Onder Bokkeveld he had encountered six hundred coloured squatters. Many were bad characters, living by stock theft. Mr. Charles Piers, the Tulbagh magistrate, visited the Koue Bokkeveld, finding many white and coloured people on Crown land without title. They lived in filth, under rocks and in huts of sugar bush. He discovered one or two lepers among them. Few worked on farms. Many stole sheep. “I do not think I ever saw a country which presented greater facilities for the concealment of thieves and their spoil,” summed up Mr. Piers.

It looked like an explosive situation – robbers in the mountains ready to join the rebellious coloured people on the plains. No doubt the three magistrates acting as members of the official commission must have wondered what they would find when they set off by Cape cart into the tense platteland.

Fifteen days later they drove back to Cape Town and reported that all rumours were groundless. They had taken evidence at D'Urban village, Malmesbury, Worcester, Groene Kloof, Tulbagh, Wellington, Paarl and Stellenbosch. Everywhere they had found a state of alarm. Nowhere were there signs of conspiracy to murder the whites, and the commission reported that "no such intention exists".

Of course they heard disturbing stories everywhere. Many conversations, said to have been overheard among the coloured people, had been recorded. Loyal servants had given vague warnings. For example, Sampie, a coloured cook, had told her mistress, Mrs. H. C. van Niekerk : "I have something on my mind, a great heaviness which I cannot utter. I may not tell it, but mistress will see within a short time, when the early crops are in and the hay is in stock. I am very sorry for master and mistress and also those poor children."

Another rumour indicated that all the heads of the white people would be cut off. It was said that the massacre would be carried out while the white people were attending the Christmas Day services. Cobus, a Hottentot of Groene Kloof, gave an earlier date and was reported to have declared: "In eight days time I will be king."

On the other hand the Rev. G. W. Stegmann, a missionary, informed the commission that the coloured people in his area had not a gun among them which would kill anything larger than a mole. He scoffed at the talk of a revolt.

In the end the commission pinned down one man who had done more than anyone else to spread the rumours and bring about this near-crisis. He was Mr. Adriaan Johannes Louw of the farm Adderley to the north of Durbanville, an influential man who had served as field cornet and justice of the Peace. Louw was an enterprising farmer, the first in the district to set up a windmill. When he addressed circulars to magistrates and friends in his own and other districts, great weight was attached to his words.

On October 24, 1851, Louw sent the following circular round the countryside: “Dear Fellow Burghers, I wish you to bear in mind and be on your guard respecting a rumour which is in circulation, and of which I have been informed by three different persons – that the black classes wish to exterminate the male white classes, and that this will take place in the next harvest, when on each farm there will be many blacks. Keep this secret from the blacks and the lower classes of whites. They know that in Cape Town there is not a single soldier or dragoon and that they now stand a good chance. At St. Domingo, a French colony, all the whites were in one night extirpated by the blacks. In future they will contrive it more cleverly, and in the evening or during the night commence at every place at the same time, falling upon every male unexpectedly when at their meals; or they speak of doing it at the full moon or Christmas or New Year ... You must therefore arm yourselves well and let a white person keep guard in the evening and during the night at every place. Take all guns and assegais from your people in the harvest-time. We are surrounded by enemies as bad as the Kaffirs ... People must not be allowed to fire shots, as usual, when the grain has been cut down. But whenever anything breaks out on any place, loud shots must be fired by the owners, which must be continued from

place to place, and everyone must collect in the neighbourhood of my residence with his family, to overcome the enemy and stop the evil at once. Please to send this with the greatest haste from place to place."

Louw was pitiable under cross-examination by members of the commission, "a mixture of self-importance and imbecility", according to their report. They summed up: "Mr. A. J. Louw was the chief propagator of the whole alarm by mischievous circulars addressed to the neighbouring farmers. He is a worthy member of society, but so excited that it appeared to affect his intellect."

So the commission found that all the rumours were groundless. Panic gave way to a deep peace. Adriaan Louw lived on at Adderley, no doubt deprecating any reference to the strange interlude of unrest which he had started. He died in 1874, and his tomb stands in the graveyard on the farm.



Chapter 16
THE PEOPLE AND THE TREES

EVERY TOWN, almost every village in South Africa has a tree with a story, often trees with traditions. Almost everyone has memories of remarkable trees and forests, and the people of the forests.

It would be hard to find many of the old type of bearded woodcutter in the Knysna forests today. They are dying out, and a way of life which was not altogether desirable is vanishing, too. Backward the old men were; yet they could perform feats with the axe which the younger generation would not dare to attempt. One thirsty, barefooted *takhaar*, *I* remember, would hold a match between his toes and bring his axe down with such precision and restraint that he would split the match without touching his own flesh. He gave this memorable show outside the bars of Knysna village in the certainty that appreciative onlookers would slake his thirst. I am glad to say that he never raised his axe after raising his glass.

Those old woodcutters lived so deep in the green silence that they formed a race apart, probably the most isolated white people in South Africa. I was assured that some of the grown men and women had never seen a village, while there were children who knew only the faces of their parents and their too numerous brothers and sisters.

Last century these strange folk dressed in skins and lived in *skerms* with only three walls. The old men I met, with their long

beards, were like Rip Van Winkles in a modern world. Progress had hardly touched these isolated characters. I thought of them as a tragic race apart; people living so far from civilisation that they had no chance of rising above their environment. A friendly, generous people struggling for their mere food in one of the hardest trades in the world. But so primitive that it was found almost impossible to help them.

Of English, Scottish and Afrikaner descent were these men of the axe. For more than a century they brought the enormous stinkwood and yellowwood trees crashing down; felling, squaring, sawing in those hot, moist, sunless backwoods. They were paid by results, and they showed themselves no mercy as they hacked out their livelihood from the ancient trees. Seldom were they well-nourished; yet they were capable of enormous labour.



Progress had hardly touched these isolated charaters ... a friendly, generous people struggling for their mere food in one of the hardest trades in the world.

For them the call of the woods was irresistible. They went out first as little boys, carrying water for the working parties, robbing wild hives, shooting bush-doves, making fires for the coffee. Small wonder that they could not be kept at school for long. As soon as they had reached their ‘teens they were ready to sweat over the huge, felled tree-trunks with axe and saw. The woodcutter could see no farther than the dense wall of his forests, no other future for his children. Year after year the number of trees allotted to woodcutters in the Government reserve was reduced. But in the mind of the woodcutter there was no threat to his existence, no plain warning.

The foreman on a private forest estate told me that he once took a middle-aged woodcutter with him on a hunting expedition to the open veld near George, fifty miles away. They travelled by motor-car, and the woodcutter was astounded. “I never thought Africa was so large,” he exclaimed.

There is a pathetic story, too, of a woodcutter who went mad, ran amuck with his axe, and killed a coloured boy. He was sent to an asylum in Cape Town. At the end of three years, during a period of sanity, he escaped and trudged back towards his beloved forests. He had no map, no knowledge of the road, nothing but a strong, sure instinct, like a homing pigeon. Fearing detection, he marched at night, avoiding villages, taking a route that lay along mountain slopes. For more than three hundred miles he stumbled on, coming at last to the lonely shack where dwelt his wife and children. One night he spent with them; then he was found and taken back. “Sentence me to years of imprisonment if you like,” he pleaded, “but let me know that one day I can come home.” Such is the spell of the forests. Men bred in cities feel as though they were facing a sinister and mysterious

presence when they step out of the sunlight into that mass of creepers, ferns and trees. They would lose themselves in five minutes after leaving a path. The woodcutters find their way by sun and stars, and never lose their keen sense of direction. But early this century a woodcutter's child disappeared in the forests. There was a great search, and undoubtedly the child would have been found but for the sudden rain that washed away all track an trace of the poor, frightened thing. All trace obliterated for ever – except a hat, which they took back to the mother ...

The talk when woodcutters gathered was usually of accidents. There was the man whose legs were pinned down by the tree he had just felled, the only miscalculation of that kind on record. When found, he had worn his fingers almost to the bone in his efforts to dig away the earth beneath him.

Planks arrived at the Knysna factories looking as though they had been planed by machinery; twenty-feet long, without a deviation of one thirty-second of an inch, all done by axe and saw. Yet most of these old craftsmen were earning from two to five pounds a month. When I visited the woodcutters a quarter of a century ago it was possible for a woodcutter in a private forest, with the help of two young sons, to make eighteen shillings a day clear profit. But such earnings could not be maintained for long. Rain and illness, usually through over-exertion, brought the average income down to a small figure.

The little body of men licensed to fell trees in the Government forests numbered about three hundred at that time. No new names had been added to the roll of registered woodcutters for many years, so that one old type has died out.

Each year the trees, to be sold were numbered by Forest Department officials,

the woodcutters inspected them, drew lots for the trees, and gathered at different forest stations for the allotment. They had to pay for the trees, of course, and there was an element of chance in the business which appealed mightily to the old men. If all their trees were perfect they secured good prices. But there was always the risk of rot, bad heart and poor colour, and sometimes it was difficult to persuade the forester that a tree was defective enough to justify a refund of the purchase price.

Old woodcutters, however, claimed that they could look at a stinkwood tree and tell at once whether the wood possessed that typical dark colour which was so desirable. The demand for stinkwood furniture, of course, is comparatively recent. Thousands of tons of it went in wagons.

Many of the woodcutters could not read, write or count; but they knew to the nearest penny how much was due to them for their work. Like the alluvial diamond diggers, their output was often pledged far in advance to their storekeepers. They were improvident, but they disliked being in debt. It was a tribute to their honesty, as a class, that they were allowed to buy necessities for months on end when, through illness, they were unable to pay. One man owed a hundred pounds at the end of a long illness. He paid back every penny within a year, and had something over; but prodigious amounts of sawdust and sweat went towards the repayment of that debt.

They could have improved their standard of living by growing some of their own food; but they were never content to till the soil for long. During slack times some of them worked as farm labourers. Then, just at a time when they were most needed, they would hurry back to the forest life.

There were far too many boy and girl marriages in the forests. Youths of twenty, who had saved enough money to buy

axes, considered that they were set up for life. Another crazy shack of poles, boards and galvanized iron appeared on someone else's land. The young man took a girl of fourteen or fifteen as a wife. And another huge family was raised.

With all their faults and follies, the woodcutters were, in the main, sober and law-abiding. The police often had to stop the brewing of bee wine, a devastating spirit made from wild honey and yeast. At New Year, the chief festival of the forests, the woodcutters sent for barrels of wine and played their guitars and concertinas. For the rest of the year they worked. Meat was a luxury to be enjoyed, at most, once a week. I visited one of their stores in the main forest and saw displayed the simple things they bought. Meal, coffee, sugar and tobacco; those were the most important items in the woodcutter's daily life. Sardines and bully beef were not bought every day. Old Dutch medicines were there, of course, for emergencies. And rows of field boots and blankets and tools, expensive articles to be stared at wistfully and purchased only after deep thought.

It is estimated that the Knysna yellow-wood tree takes two thousand years to grow. And the old woodcutters were men of earlier centuries, like the trees.

Once there was a fire in these forests that terrified man and beast. It was the fire that swept from Swellendam to Uitenhage in 1869, the greatest fire known in South Africa since the white man came. If there is anyone still living who remembers that fire clearly, then he must be almost a centenarian. But I met several old people in Knysna years ago who talked about the great fire as the most vivid event of their lives.

That fire raged along a course of four hundred miles, and spread out in some places over a front of more than a hundred miles. It is hard to say where or how it

started, and one newspaper reported: “From Uitenhage to Riversdale the country appears to have burst simultaneously into a blaze. The glorious forest of Knysna is destroyed.” After a careful study of the records, however, I think that Uitenhage saw the opening of this catastrophe.

It was on February 9, 1869 that the people of Uitenhage awoke to a misty dawn. This was followed by the hottest wind they had ever known, a north-east wind like a flame, a wind that put a stop to every sort of work and drove the bewildered people indoors. At noon the shade temperatures was one hundred and twelve degrees. It was difficult to breathe. Late that afternoon the wind was blowing from the south-west at hurricane force.

They had seen a mass of smoke in the distance earlier in the afternoon. Now the sun was covered and it was difficult to find a way through the blinding smoke in the village.

News reached Uitenhage that the farm of Captain Boys, the showplace of the district, had been destroyed with all the household treasures and a fine collection of old Dutch masters. Mrs. Boys and her four daughters had saved their lives by wrapping themselves in blankets and taking refuge in the river. Ashes smothered the Cape road for miles. Wagons and freight were burnt out. Many sheep were lost, while some escaped with the wool scorched close to their skins. This was a cruel day for the wild creatures of the forest, too, and buck were so tamed by fear that they crouched on stoeps in Uitenhage. The village itself escaped.

Humansdorp appeared to be in great danger, and the church bell rang the alarm. The whole Tsitsikama forest as far as Cape St. Francis was ablaze, while the hills to the north of Humansdorp were also in flames. “It was like a prairie fire in America,” wrote a Humansdorp resident. “Resinous odours filled the air and a

hurricane carried smoke, fire and sparks. High overhead flew great sheets of flame. The sun was as red as fire, and more than one person thought that the final day of God's just retribution had arrived. The fire was two miles from the village when the wind veered to the north-west. We were surrounded by fire, yet not a house in Humansdorp was touched,"

There were forty-one deaths in the Humansdorp district, some people being burnt to death while others were killed by the heat. Grain crops which had been reaped and the ripening mealies and beans were lost.

Knysna saw the frightening drama of the fire on the following day, which happened to be Ash Wednesday. Mr. B. H. Darnell, owner of the fine Westford property, recorded his experiences: "At dawn the berg wind, the sirocco of South Africa, was blowing steadily from the north. The temperature was a hundred degrees before eight in the morning, and at nine we saw a great fire raging in the flats above us. I knew it was all up with Westford. As the sole guardian of thirteen women and children I was distracted. Denser and denser grew the smoke and brighter the glare of the fire, while the thermometer rose higher and higher and the wind increased in violence. At first I could only hear the noise of the fire. Presently, above the smoke, I saw liquid fire pouring over cliffs, and below them, on the opposite bank of the river, great streams of fire."

As the fire roared on, Darnell and the women and children found themselves literally at the mouth of a blow-pipe. They ran for the river and joined people who had found safety on the pontoon. There they were safe, but the fire had made a clean sweep of Westford. Houses, trees, gardens, orchards and forest had gone. "The labour and pleasure of sixteen years has been swept away in a few minutes," Darnell reported. "Books, pictures, furniture, plate, the memorials of a lifetime

have gone. One might as well be on the barest Karoo place as on the banks of the Knysna. Nature can never restore the grand old trees, pride of the forest, some of them thirty feet in circumference."

When the main fire had passed, Darnell walked along the river bank surveying the devastation. Not only buck, but elephants, had been roasted alive. He could find hardly a sign of life except a cunning old baboon which had avoided the fire and now crouched in the desolation. Mighty trees were still crashing in every direction, some hissing as they fell into the river. By a benevolent freak of the fire, all the villages in its path, including Knysna, escaped destruction. So close did the flames pass, however, that the heat in Knysna was intense. The toll in the districts was indeed heavy.

In the Knysna area the Duthies of Belvidere had been burning the veld for grazing. This made a fire-path, and so the great blaze left their famous estate untouched. But the fine Portland farm owned by the Barringtons was almost entirely destroyed. Cottages and forest on Eastford (a glebe of the English church where the bishop lived) were burnt out. The Newdigates of Forest Hall lost two thousand acres of forest, but the house was saved by its iron roof. Dozens of small farmers lost their homes, stock and crops. The poor woodcutters, who had the least to lose, probably felt the effects of the fire more than anyone else, for they could not afford to replace their small possessions.

Mr. Barnard of Buffels Vermaak, a neighbour of Darnell, made for the river when the fire became intense. He took a chest containing thousands of sovereigns and the family silver with him on a small cart. The fire came so close to where he had sought refuge that he and his family had to stand up to their necks in water to avoid catching alight. They saved their

lives and their money, though the gold and silver melted in the chest.

A schoolmaster on the flats above Phantom Pass, between Westford and Portland, was giving a Bible lesson when he noticed the fire in the distance. Suddenly a whirlwind appeared, black with smoke. The wind rose to a roar and whined its menace in the roof, shaking the whole building so that all knew it would collapse at any moment. The door had jammed, but the children and master scrambled through the window just in time. They could see the flames leaping from hilltop to hilltop, missing the homes and trees in the valleys. It was so dark at two in the afternoon that survivors had to light their lamps.

One family stacked their furniture in the open and prepared to load it on to a wagon. The flames came before they could move off, taking the furniture and sparing the house.

Snakes were observed writhing madly, with mouths open, in the effort to escape. Frightened birds flew into houses, and thousands of birds were smothered by the smoke. A man saw eight buck standing together and cooling their burnt feet in the river.

A conversation between Newdigate and Barrington after the fire was recorded many years ago, and provides a valuable sidelight on the disaster and the philosophy of the victims.

“You are a marvel to be so ‘cheerful after what you have gone through,” remarked Newdigate.

Barrington replied: “I have much to thank God for. My dear wife and all my children are safe. We are pioneers in a new country, and I fear that I for one was selfish in wishing for earthly comfort. My children escaped by a miracle. A native boy helped to take the little children, one a baby in arms, to a piece of bare rock

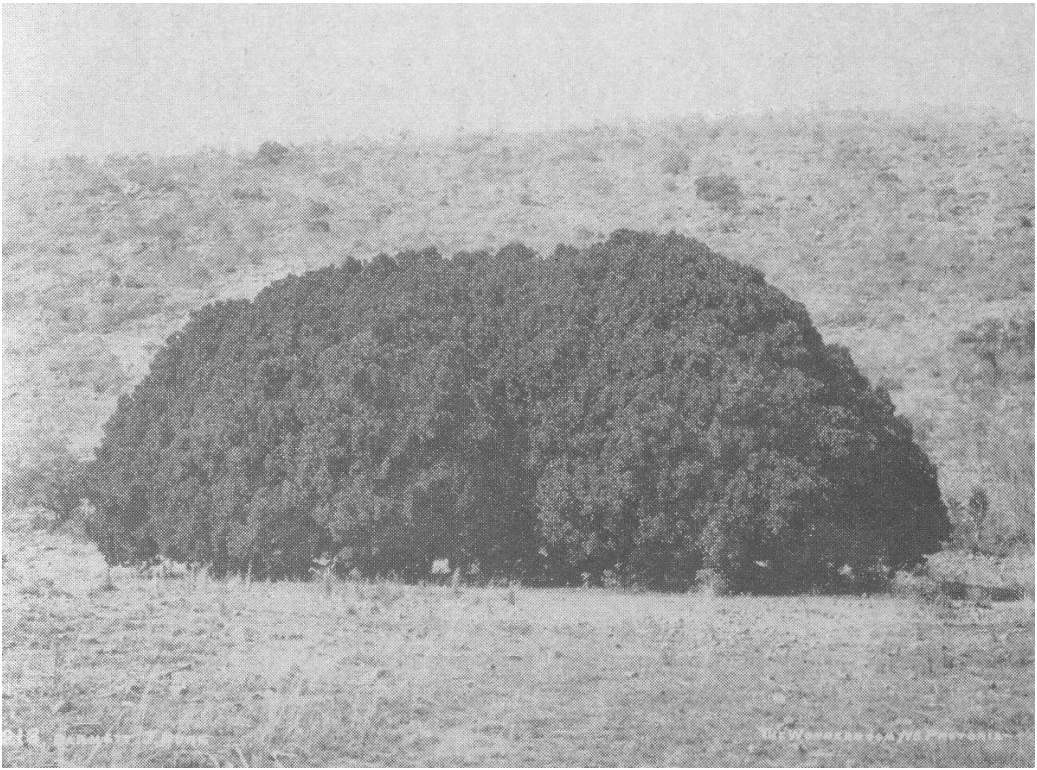
well above the forests. My home has gone, above all my valuable library is in ashes. I still have a few bottles of wine and a sack of meal, but my stores for the year have gone. I have already started to build again. After all, I have the land, the cattle, servants, wagons and sawmill – and my wife and children." People in Cape Town, with their traditional kindness, held a public meeting to raise money for the needy victims of the fire. Bread, clothes, bedding and food were rushed to the afflicted districts. Knysna held a day of thanksgiving and special church services on March 14.

In the forests the fire still smouldered. The ashes were still warm in pits and caves six months after the inferno. And the origin of it all? Veld burning, the hand of man, the old curse of South Africa.

In the Knysna forests, impressive though they are, I always feel that there is too much to see. No doubt that is why I prefer deserts to the lush country. The isolated tree makes a landmark.

I was flying round the Pretoria countryside with Major "Duke" Meintjes in an old DH 9 long ago when Meintjes pointed out the Wonderboom. This is a tree to remember, a tree that became a forest. Very soon I drove out for eight miles, through the narrow break in the Magaliesberg called Voortrekker Nek, to explore this marvel at ground level.

The Wonderboom is an evergreen wild fig tree which owes its world-wide fame among botanists to the extraordinary manner of its growth. It is about seventy-five feet high, a hemispherical mass with thirteen individual trunks which have sprung from the original central trunk. Many years ago the branches became too heavy and took root like strawberry plants for climbing shrubs. This process is all the more unusual when you consider that this particular fig tree (*Ficus Pretoriae Burtt Davy*) is more of a tropical growth, and



The Wonderboom is an evergreen wild fig tree which owes its world-wide fame among botanists to the exraordinary manner of it growth

Pretoria is almost its extreme southern limit.

Dr. I. B. Pole Evans, the botanist, described the Wonderboom as “the most remarkable example of its species in Africa and a national monument”. Its age has been estimated at three centuries. The central mass of stem has a circumference of eighty-one feet, and the whole tree forms a canopy over an area large enough to shelter hundreds of people.

Bushmen lived in a cave overlooking the Wonderboom centuries ago. There is a legend that when natives attacked the cave, the Bushmen escaped through a secret tunnel which penetrates the mountain. However, no trace of this old sanctuary has been found.

Charles Zeyher the botanical collector seems to have missed the Wonderboom during his visit to the neighbourhood with Burke in the eighteen-forties. The first mention of the tree was made by a Swiss missionary named Creux in 1862, and his measurements show that the tree has grown little since then.

A Natal trader named Menne was camping under the Wonderboom with his servants and cattle in the early days. Fires were blazing and the evening meal was being prepared. Into this pleasant scene rushed a black rhino. It stampeded the cattle, charged the servants, scattered the cooking pots and fires. Then, after staring at the disconcerted humans it broke out of the tree circle and departed. White and black rhino rubbed their hides against the Wonderboom in those days, but they will not be seen there again.

In the wagon days the Wonderboom was a favourite outspan. Transport riders halted there. Close by is an old fort, built to protect the road to Pretoria from warlike natives. During one native campaign a whole commando with sixty wagons made its headquarters under the tree.

Many a Dingaan's Day celebration has been held there.

Dr. W. G. Atherstone, the geologist, who identified the first South African diamond, examined the Wonderboom in 1873 and carried away a twig. Since then almost every herbarium in the world has been supplied with branches.

Lady Florence Dixie rode out to the Wonderboom a few years after Atherstone, accompanied by Sir Evelyn Wood, General Ballairs and Colonel Gildea. She commented in a book she wrote on the natural defensive strength of the position. "One of the principal sights which we were bent on seeing that day was the great Wonderboom, or wonderful tree. When we had threaded the Pass and skirted a reedy lake from which the cry of the wild duck arose, the tree, with its heavy mass of foliage, hove in sight. looking like some huge giant amidst the dwarf vegetation that surrounded it. Putting spurs to our horses, several of us raced to reach the spot first, which foolish exploit under a hot sun made both ourselves and our horses very hot, and rendered the dark, cool shade of the great tree doubly acceptable and refreshing. Examination proved it to be of an ambitious and progressive nature, the larger branches, as soon as they became developed, drooping earthwards until, taking root, fresh life springs forth from the younger scions of the old stem."

An interesting water-colour of the Wonderboom in 1879 by Mrs. Archdeacon Roberts shows the loop connections from the main stem by which the tree propagated itself. These were chopped off by vandals this century, while the interior of the main trunk was burnt out.

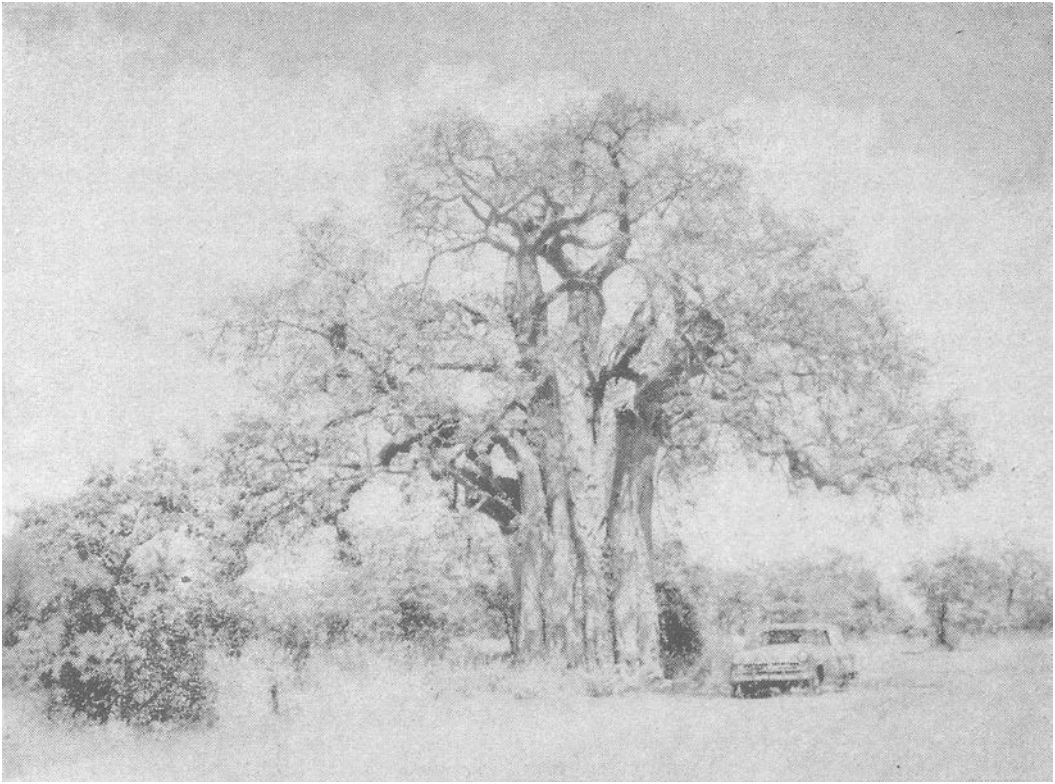
Further damage was caused as the result of the dreams of a woman prophet in Pretoria. She declared that a great hoard of gold lay buried near the roots, or in the huge trunk itself. The story became linked

with the legend of the “Kruger millions”, the boxes of gold which the President was supposed to have hidden when he was forced to leave the Transvaal. Dr. Leyds, who accompanied Kruger on that journey, made it absolutely clear that no republican gold was buried during that period. Treasure legends never die, in spite of contradictions. Many holes, some seven feet deep, were dug round the main stem, and the last remaining connections between the main trunk and the second and third outer circles of trunks were severed.

Across the Aapies River, but not far away, is the Klein Wonderboom of the same species. This is the home of many birds which enjoy the wild figs and other fruits of the area. There you may see starlings plum-coloured and green, sunbirds seeking their nectar, warblers and crested barbets, woodpeckers and doves, Dr. Austin Roberts identified two hundred distinct species in this neighbourhood. The whole area is now a nature reserve and bird sanctuary, a strong contrast indeed with the wild days of the *oud-stryders* and hunters.

Another tree of adventure is the baobab. When I sleep under a baobab far from the cities I think of the creatures that roamed beneath that grotesque tree thousands of years ago. For the weird baobab is probably the oldest living tree, reaching five thousand years under favourable conditions.

It belongs to the tropics, of course, and you find them all the way down Africa from Egypt to the Transvaal, always within sound of the “ping-ing-ing-zzz” of the mosquito. I camped under an enormous baobab in the far Kaokoveld once, and drank the acid, lemon-tasting beverage made from the seed capsules. As a remedy for malaria, however, I would prefer paludrine. The old explorers had to



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use what they could find. Natives make an alcoholic drink from these seeds, the "Laughing Spirits" of many a night of revelry. Monkeys also love the fruit, and in many parts of Africa the baobab is known as the monkey bread tree. David Livingstone called the baobabs "those upturned carrots". He slept in a hollow baobab and declared there was room for thirty men inside the trunk.

An eccentric official at Katima Molilo in the Caprivi Strip found a new use for the old baobab; he installed a flush lavatory, probably the only one on the African continent. However, he moved all the equipment out again after encountering a mamba there. Baobabs growing in Northern Transvaal villages are sometimes used as garages. More than one farmer has discovered that the interior of the tree has a preservative atmosphere; you can keep meat fresh there, and it is a good, cool place for a dairy. Towards the end of last century there was a bar in a fat baobab outside Leydsdorp, a famous haunt of the gold-seekers.

Native chiefs in Abyssinia and farther south have been buried in the trunks of baobabs. Their bodies have become mummified owing to the preservative action. No doubt that is the reason why certain baobabs are reputed to be the homes of devils. After dark the devils lie in wait among the twisted branches for victims. Place your ear to the trunk and you will hear the devils inside chuckling. Even the boldest native sings as he passes a baobab at night, never pausing to listen to the evil voices.

Perhaps the bees are responsible for the legend. Wild bees often perforate the soft trunk of a baobab and lodge their honey in the recesses. This is regarded by many native epicures as the finest honey in Africa.

In dry areas the top of the baobab trunk acts as a reservoir, catching rainwater and

dew. When you see pegs driven into the trunk you may be sure there is a natural reservoir above. Early travellers recorded their gratitude for this wise custom, saying that the water saved their lives. However, the tree reservoir is not without its perils. I heard of a lone Bushman who climbed in search of moisture, fell into the deep, hollow trunk and perished. But in lion country the baobab may be a lifesaver indeed. The foot traveller who has to sleep beside the road feels much more comfortable in the branches.

The baobab, cream of tartar tree, received its botanical name *Adansonia digitata* from the French traveller Adanson. He examined fine specimens in Senegal two hundred years ago. (Cape Verde, where Adanson landed, gained its name when the early Portuguese sighted the green leaves of the baobabs in the desert.) Scientists have calculated from the rings in the cross-section of the main trunk that the baobab may live twice as long as the Sacred Bo-Tree of Ceylon, the fig tree planted nearly three centuries before the birth of Christ and worshipped ever since. Humboldt, the explorer, spoke of the baobab as “the oldest organic monument of our planet”.

The bottle-shaped trunk of the baobab swells out in the course of the centuries to a diameter of thirty or forty feet. Some specimens have a girth greater than their height. The maximum height is about seventy feet. Then the soft, spongy trunk branches out into huge, nightmarish branches carrying little golden lamps of flowers.

Probably the best-known baobab in Africa is “The Tree” close to the Victoria Falls, and seen by every tourist. (This should not be confused with the tree on Livingstone Island at the very brink of the Falls, mentioned elsewhere in this book, on which Livingstone carved his initials.) Many baobabs have been declared “historical monuments” to save them from

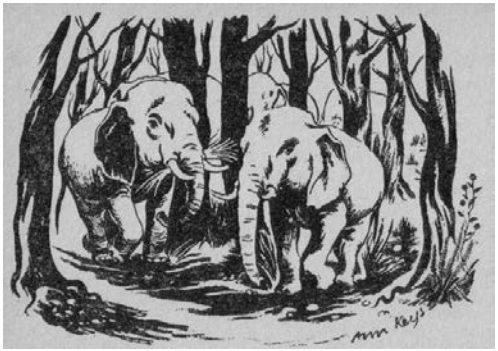
destruction. Many fine specimens have been protected in the streets and gardens of Messina. Between the wars a large baobab was worth about a hundred pounds, and a firm cut them down and pulped them for paper. Since 1942, however, it has been illegal to fell a baobab anywhere in the Union.

One remote baobab in the Zambesi valley records stirring and tragic pages of African adventure. Old hunters chose that tree as a monument to friends who would hunt no more. The inscriptions read as follows:

Rider, died fever Lake Ngami 1850.
Maher, killed by Baralongs 1852.
Wahlberg, killed by wounded elephant 1857.
Dolman, died of thirst in Kalahari desert 1851.
Robinson, taken by crocodile Botetli river 1851.
Pretorius, died fever near Victoria Falls 1862.
Bonfield, killed by crocodile Ovamboland 1861.
Burgess, blown up, gunpowder accident 1860.

If a baobab tree is cut down, say the natives, lions will surely visit the spot. A hunter once told me that there was some ground for the belief; the water stored in the trunk would attract the animals in a dry season.

Truly the baobab marks the path of African adventures. And surely it is the most fantastic of South Africa's five hundred varieties of native trees. Always their vast trunks and mushroom branches give the landscape an impression of their size, coupled with a grey breath of old age. I think the early Dutch explorer's description remains the most fitting: *"Eenen boom die, niet minder dan de Olyphant onder de Beesten, een monster is onder het geboomte."* (A tree that, no less than the elephant among the animals, is a monster among the trees.)



Chapter 17
TRAILS OF THE TUSKERS

ELEPHANTS TAKE us back to the dawn of the world. Other great creatures of the prehistoric darkness are now known only by their bones. The elephant comes trumpeting into our day as a surviving mammoth, the real king of the beasts, brave and strong and possibly wiser than the apes. But unless we are careful, this century may be the twilight of the African elephant.

Wherever you find elephants there are mysteries to be solved. I have listened to the local elephant legends in many parts of Africa. A sight I shall never forget was the well-known Bor herd on the Nile near Juba, seen from the air in wartime. They looked like chubby mice. But the elephants which I regard fondly as romantic little groups (never having been in the way of a stampede) are the Knysna and Addo herds. Elephants are rarities indeed at the southern end of Africa. It is strange to find any elephants alive in these forests after the massacres of the past, and they are worth preserving.

Some say that the Knysna elephants are the largest in the world, while the Addo elephants are dwarfs. Certainly a story worth investigating. I have heard the legend of the “elephant graveyard” in both areas. Then there are tales, almost incredible but true, of elephant intelligence. All over Africa there are roads and railways which follow the old trails of the tuskers.

Many a government surveyor, seeking the easiest gradients, has found his theodolite merely confirming what the elephants discovered ages ago. Bloukrans Pass on the Garden Route is an old elephant highway. A surveyor followed an elephant track between Tsitsikama and the east. He came to one place where the elephants must have climbed steep rocks and used the root of a tree to lever themselves upwards. It was difficult, but the only way through, and the elephants had conquered it.

Many old people in the town of Knysna have never seen an elephant. Yet the last four are there, in the cool green shelter of the forest; descendants of the vast herds that made their home among the tall stinkwood trees when the world was young. It is another proof of man's greed that only four of all those uncounted thousands should remain. Perhaps the oldest of the survivors escaped from white hunters with muzzle-loaders. No one knows how long an elephant may live. Long ago the herds in these forests became the victims of Bushmen who used poisoned arrows and dug pits. How long will the last four survive?

My friend Denis Woods, mountaineer and authority on wild life in Southern Africa, tells me that the three bulls and one cow of the Knysna group now roam in a reduced area only six miles from Knysna town. Late last century there were hundreds of elephants in these forests. Denis Woods believes that only the importation of new blood could save this herd. The calves would not be true Knysna elephants, but the strain might be passed on by the surviving bull.

I went in search of those elephants years ago, when there were more of them, but saw only their droppings and the boughs they had snapped during their tremendous passage. In the forest, seven miles from Knysna, I met a timber foreman, one of the handful of men who knew the

elephants. “They were rooting up the ferns in a kloof when I last saw them,” he said. “Talking to each other with voices like turkey-cocks, rolling in the mud-holes, tobogganing down the muddy slopes with their feet together like great dogs. I was not more than three hundred yards away, but they could not get my scent – the wind was in my direction. For ten minutes I watched them at play; then I shouted. They all went swaying off blindly into the undergrowth, gaining speed like battering-rams, the old ones urging the calves along, until they disappeared, still trumpeting and breaking down the young trees in their path.”

On rainy days, sometimes, the herd leaves the forest to rove the open veld. Elephants detest heat and the blind flies that worry them in the open on hot days. Also, they seem to know that they are less likely to encounter human beings in wet weather.

The foreman once found an elephant skeleton, with one tusk in the ground, broken, and the other missing – stolen by some poacher. Years ago there was a daring band of Knysna woodcutters who used to prey on the elephant herds. The ivory was smuggled away under loads of timber in ox wagons fitted with false bottoms. Elephant hunting was still permitted in the Northern Transvaal in those days; and there the poachers sold their tusks.

People in Knysna still talk of the Duke of Edinburgh’s elephant hunt in 1864, and old engravings in many homes show the Duke firing at an enormous tusker at eighteen yards range while his frenzied horse bolts. That day the dogs tackled a cornered herd. The elephants immediately formed a sort of laager, with their tusks outwards and the young elephants inside the square. They maintained that formation to keep the dogs at bay; then the elephant leader trumpeted and the herd stampeded to safety. Later in the day, however, two fine bulls were shot and the

Duke took the heads and skins back to England with him.

Some accounts state that one of the Duke's elephants measured thirteen feet at the shoulder, while the length from trunk to tail was thirty-two feet. A Knysna elephant shot in 1919 was reported to stand twelve feet six inches in height, and this specimen was claimed as the largest ever mounted for a museum anywhere in the world. However, the South African Museum authorities contested the claim on the ground that the system of measurement was faulty. This particular elephant is to be seen in the Transvaal Museum, Pretoria.

It is difficult to prove the assertion that the Knysna elephants are (or rather were) the largest members of the race because there are few records to assist the scientist. The old hunters were interested only in ivory. They measured tusks, not torsos. However, all through the years of hunting you come across references to the Knysna giants. One day, perhaps, a sufficient number of skulls will be found and measured by some keen zoologist in search of the facts.

So much mystery still surrounds the life story and habits of the elephant that it is not remarkable that the Knysna herd provides riddles for the people of the forests. There is a government station in the forest at Deepwalls. Year after year, sometimes on the same night each year, the herd crosses the road at the thirteenth milestone near Deepwalls. They remain in a lonely, burnt-out clearing for two days; then they return to their favourite abode at a place called Oubrand. No one can say what strange instinct moves them to make this regular pilgrimage.

Regular camp followers of the Knysna elephants are the wild pigs of the forest. Often the herds mingle. The pigs, of course, know very well that the powerful elephants will kick up all sorts of tempting food in the shape of roots, seeds

and insects. It will be a sad day for the *bosvark* when the last Knysna elephant dies.

Baboons also keep the elephants company. When a man approaches the elephants go swaying off blindly, crashing through the bush, urging the calves along and breaking down the young trees in their path. The plantations suffer, even from this small herd. Elephants like tasty roots. They make a mass attack, like a battering-ram, on a tree which is too strong for one elephant to uproot alone. A forest official once showed me a fire-belt of young blackwood trees, valued at two hundred pounds, torn down by the herd. These Knysna elephants seem to hate the works of man. They have hurled wagons off the forest tracks, scattered loose stone beacons, destroyed gates.

Nevertheless it is more than half a century since a Knysna elephant killed a man. He had foolishly pitched his camp on an elephant trail, and while he slept his dog annoyed an elephant. Furiously the elephant charged the dog and crushed the sleeping man. I have also heard of a hunter of the ‘seventies named Marais who shot ninety-nine elephants and laid a bet that he would pluck a hair from the tail of his hundredth elephant before shooting it. The elephant scented him, and that ended Knox’s career. False or true, the tale bears a strong resemblance to an Addo legend which I shall relate presently.

Woodcutters used to fear the elephants, and not altogether without reason. When they felled timber near a herd they always lashed a rope ladder to a safe tree. I was told of a party of woodcutters who were “treed” for two days. Of course there are many false alarms, and a famous practical joke used to be played by the woodcutters. One of the party crept away from the camp at night, rolled a log down towards his companions, and blew into a paraffin tin. This reproduced exactly the terrifying

noise of a charging elephant. The woodcutters cleared out, and the humourist was able to jeer at the men in the tree-tops.

It is said that the Knysna elephants go pounding across country, at intervals of many years, to visit their dwarf cousins in the Addo Bush. No such stampede, however, has been observed in recent times. The last of the Knysna giants have little in common with their Addo cousins.

Thousands of people see the Addo elephants every year, one of the most interesting herds in Africa. Generations of hunters, years of hunger and thirst, made these elephants so vicious that Selous declared that any man who ventured into the Addo bush unarmed was a “suicidal ass”. Now the last rifle-shot has been heard in the Addo National Game Reserve. The elephants have been enticed into the open, supplied with water and oranges. New roads have been built round the reserve. The Addo herd has taken its place as one of the wonders of South Africa.

Once the Addo elephants were giants like the other herd of survivors a hundred miles away in the Knysna forests. The dense Addo scrub did not give them the protection which instinct warned them was necessary. And so, in the course of many centuries, according to one theory, the Addo elephants became smaller in stature while increasing in girth. This change not only enabled them to escape observation, but also to force a passage through the bush with greater ease.

Are the Addo elephants really different from all their other African cousins? Some naturalists are inclined to dispute the theory, and they point to a male Addo elephant which measured eleven feet two inches at the shoulders; certainly a tall elephant anywhere. Nevertheless, such an authority as Lt.-Colonel J. Stevenson-Hamilton, former warden of the Kruger National Park, described the Addo herd as

of “uniformly smaller size”. Dr. Austin Roberts, too, thought the Addo elephants formed a race apart. Most of them are shorter and broader than other elephants. Their hairy bodies are peculiar, a throw-back to the shaggy mammoths of the ice age.

Ivory hunters of the past found the Addo elephants disappointing, for many of them had broken their tusks in the dense under-growth, and seven out of ten were without tusks. Only in recent years have scientists realised that this was another example of evolution. A forest elephant needs tusks for stripping bark and digging out roots. Tusks were a handicap in the Addo bush, and so they disappeared. You can still trace the groove of the upper lip in tusk less specimens, but many skulls show no tusk cavity. Thus it is fair to assume that the process must have started thousands of years ago. But I wish someone would explain to me why some of the elephants still display tusks.

The exact strength of the present Addo herd is unknown, though it is believed that there are at least four large bulls and thirteen cows and calves. So these two small groups, dwarfs of Addo and giants of Knysna, are all that are left of the herds hundreds strong that devastated the farms of early settlers and still roamed unchecked at the beginning of this century.

Even in 1919, when the value of such rarities as elephants was not realised as it is today, the extermination order was given reluctantly. Even then there were glimmerings of the idea that elephants might attract tourists. Farming near the reserve, of course, had become almost impossible owing to the raids of the herd. Dams had been ruined, fences uprooted, irrigation canals destroyed. The massacre of the herd was a mistake, but at the time no one was prepared to take the trouble and spend the money necessary to preserve the Addo herd.

Major P. J. Pretorius, *C.M.G.,* D.S.O. (the man who located the German cruiser Konigsberg in the Rufiji delta) was employed by the provincial authorities to exterminate the Addo elephants. He claimed to have shot more than one hundred and twenty in eleven months. Then the slaughter was stopped.

Long afterwards, during World War II, I met Major Pretorius for the first time, with an Italian car (and Italian driver) he had "commandeered" in Abyssinia. I had always been puzzled by the death of Major-General Ravenshaw during the Addo hunt, and I asked Pretorius about it. Pretorius reminded me that the great Selous had once said that hunting in the Addo thickets would amount to suicide. It is a maze, a villainous thorn jungle. One day a honeymoon couple entered the Addo bush near Coerney station and were never seen again. The search-parties returned with nothing more than a few scraps of clothing, and no one knows whether they died of thirst, or were killed by elephants or buffalo.

Ravenshaw, according to newspaper reports at the time, had gone after a leopard with two coloured beaters and had blundered into a herd of elephant. During the stampede, the beaters lost touch and returned to camp without the general. Pretorius told me of the search he organised; the whole of his own party, forty farmers and their labourers. And at last they came upon the body of General Ravenshaw, face down, untouched by any animal, and guarded by two Alsatians belonging to Pretorius. The post-mortem revealed heart failure, due to General Ravenshaw's sufferings in World War I as a prisoner-of-war. He had simply died of shock when the elephants charged.

Pretorius recalled a queer sequel to this tragedy. He sent a telegram to Mrs. Ravenshaw, who was staying with Lady Buxton at Government House, Cape Town. "This is to say that my husband is

dead," said Mrs. Ravenshaw as she opened the telegram. Four days before that, at the time of Ravenshaw's death, she had known that she would never see him again.

Only a hunter with the skill of Pretorius could hope to survive for long in the notorious Addo bush and Pretorius had to find a new technique to make hunting possible. He found the waterholes first. Then he made a ladder to see over the bush, and carried it with him everywhere. He shot almost every elephant at point blank range. And he used dogs cleverly, finding them more reliable than some of his coloured beaters.

A deadly maze is the Addo, and many dramatic encounters have occurred there. Among the last of the professional elephant hunters in the district over a century ago was a daredevil named Thackwray. He made a bet that he would find a large and vicious bull elephant, chalk his initials on its hind quarters, and then shoot it.

Thackwray chalked his elephant all right, and fired. But the dying elephant managed to grip the hunter with its trunk, and the two were found dead together. Thus did Thackwray learn, too late, the same lesson that Knox of Knysna had learnt to his cost.

Crick, a white man who appears to have been a sort of half-witted Tarzan, lived in the Addo early this century. In spite of his feeble brain he was a first-class tracker and hunter. Crick came into town only to earn money for sugar and coffee, salt and ammunition; then he would vanish into the bush again and live on the buck and birds he shot. Sometimes he poached an elephant, always selecting one with ivory.

Crick's only friend was a farmer named Attrill, who kept an elephant calf as a pet. The pet died, and Attrill and Crick ventured foolishly into the Addo in the

hope of capturing another young elephant. Crick led Attrill up to a cow elephant with calf. Attrill wounded the mother. The elephant charged, and though Crick fired again and again, Attrill was smashed to pulp. Crick never recovered from this experience. Long afterwards his skeleton was found in the bush, and beneath it there was a rusty revolver with one cartridge used.

Every farmer in the district has stories to tell of chance encounters with the elephants. One farmer, taking a load of forage to the nearest town by wagon at night, heard the elephants trumpeting along the road. They smelt the forage and cautiously approached the wagon. The farmer was a man of resource. He seized a bundle of hay, set fire to it, and dropped it on the road. The elephants fell back until the light they feared had burnt out. By firing more and more hay the farmer reached safety, the wagon almost empty.

Another farmer named Pienaar was not so fortunate. He was out driving cattle when a lone bull elephant charged and killed him. Some years ago a fencing contractor named Vermaak was killed in much the same way; he was hunting buck with a shotgun when a “rogue” attacked him. The search party found his remains days afterwards. This death, according to the trackers, was caused by a rogue elephant known as Blinkvoet, which had a lame leg. Blinkvoet was a notorious old killer, but a Hottentot escaped from it by creeping into an aardvark burrow and cowering underground. The elephant tore up the earth but failed to reach him.

The most recent tragedy was in 1952, when Janet Marthinus, a seventeen-year-old servant, was trampled to death at night on the road between Addo station and Addo Heights. She was with her sister and two men when the elephants charged the party. All the others escaped.

Addo farmers used to set traps for the elephant raiders. A “spring cannon” fixed in a well-known path would sometimes kill an elephant. Fitzsimons of the Port Elizabeth Museum recorded an Addo elephant bull which had carried several bullets *and a brass cannon-ball an inch in diameter* for years. Many other elephants in that herd had been peppered with lead, and it had not improved their tempers.

It is said that the Addo elephants have a system of signals, and that they always used it in the days when they were hunted. Often a herd of elephants makes more noise than an express train passing through a station. Their trumpeting could be heard easily above the roar of a liner’s siren. But if you approached a herd of Addo elephants in the days when they distrusted man, a shrill call would go out which put every elephant on guard. They might stampede with the noise of an earthquake or vanish silently into the bush with only the cracking of a bough here or there to show which way they had gone.

Chains of fire were used at one time to discourage the Addo elephants from wandering out of their reserve. In hot, dry weather they become restless and they invaded farms in search of water. Occasionally they broke through the flaming bush and ran amuck on cultivated land. Within an hour a single elephant on the rampage can create havoc reminiscent of a cyclone. An elephant has a great thirst to slake.

When the Addo elephants left their own bush to seek prickly pears in open country, they had to cross the Port Elizabeth railway line. Several were killed by trains; in 1940 there were two such collisions. There was a time, however, when an old bull elephant besieged the railwaymen at Coerney station, forty miles from Port Elizabeth. It all arose through the folly of the station foreman’s dog, which tackled the elephant.



When the Addo elphants left their own bush to seek prickly pears in open country they had to cross the Port Elizabeth railway line. Several were killed by trains.

A moment later the dog realised its mistake and went yelping back to the station with the elephant thundering after it.

That elephant had tusks. It tore down the station fences, pounded along the platform and searched the outside walls of the station buildings for hours, seeking its enemy the dog, scenting it but never cornering it. At last the owner managed to coax his dog into a room. The furious elephant went off, only to return a few hours later.

All the station staff and some friends who were visiting them had barricaded themselves in one of the houses. A goods train arrived during this crisis, but the driver remained outside the station until the elephant had departed. Those railwaymen never forgot the siege of Coerney station. And it seems that the survivors of the Addo herd have never forgotten Pretorius and his dogs. You could madden those gentle, orange-eating Addo elephants to this day by firing a shot in the air or setting a dog on them. I do not wish to be there if any practical joker decides to try this trick, for I have seen the anger of the elephants in several far corners.

These survivors owe their lives to Colonel Deneys Reitz who, as Minister of Lands, took steps to preserve them. He described their terror-stricken journeys beyond the fringe of the Addo bush in search of water – night raids which placed them at the mercy of indignant farmers with rifles.

“They have learnt by grim experience the exact extent of their dubious sanctuary,” declared Colonel Reitz. “They know to a yard where runs the invisible boundary through the bush of their reserve. Watch their movements during their nightly sortie to drink at the river, and it is clear that the journey is to them one of recurrent terror. They keep to the densest part of the bush by day, and at night they

slink down furtively to drink at a gulp, after which they rush back to cover."

The men on the spot who helped to save the elephants were the Harvey brothers, sons of a pioneer farmer in the area. The Harveys allowed the remnants of the herd to live in peace on their farms.

Mr. Harold Trollope, the game ranger appointed by the National Parks Board, had the delicate task of driving the elephants off the farms and into the reserve (proclaimed in 1931) after windmills and dams had been provided for them. Trollope was the man who devised the diet of oranges which has probably soothed the nerves of the elephants more than anything else. A herd which was once rightly suspicious of man now comes out into the open every evening to be fed.

Wherever you go on the trails of the tuskers you are bound to hear the undying tale of the elephant graveyard. It is a great cemetery, piled high with ivory. Here the elephants, guided by instinct, make their painful, blundering way when death is upon them.

I have heard the story of "ivory valley" in Knysna, in the Eastern Province, in Zululand, and in many parts of tropical Africa. A band of hunters, camping along the lower reaches of the Sundays River soon after World War I, found a gorge with a mound of disintegrating elephant bones. A similar deposit of bones and teeth was identified by these hunters at a place known as Boesaks Kloof on the farm Glen Rollo at Tootabi. Natives came from far away to carry off the larger bones. They ground up these bones for "muti", mixed it with mealie meal and fed their children on the porridge to give them the courage of the elephants.

Mpande, thirty miles south of the Umzimvubu river mouth, is another "elephant cemetery" area. Mr. W. Stanyon was removing hardwood logs for export

from the virgin forests there in 1933 when he reached a clearing of several acres. Here he found skeletons of a number of elephants, but a careful search failed to reveal the tusks. Mr. Stanyon did find an ancient assegai head, so that he may have discovered the victims of primitive hunters.

About twenty years ago an amateur excavator named Laurenson took me to a spot near the mouth of the Milnerton vlei and showed me what he called a graveyard of the mammoths. For years he had been digging up fossilised tusks and the teeth of mammoths on Cape Town's doorstep. These mammoths were of the type known scientifically as the archidiskodon, the giant forerunner of the elephant. Laurenson declared that Milnerton and Paarden Island were vast cemeteries of prehistoric animals, especially elephants. He thought that Table Bay might once have been an inland vlei where strange creatures roamed. Certainly many of them died in the Milnerton lagoon.

Elephants were roaming over most of the Cape Peninsula when Van Riebeeck arrived, but the last elephant on the Cape Flats was shot fifty years later. Early last century, however, you would have encountered elephant herds five hundred strong in the Graaff-Reinet area. Ivory markets flourished long after that time. There were hundreds of elephants in the Knysna forests as late as 1876, and no one imagined that they would become almost extinct. So the legend of the elephant cemetery became part of the folklore in every forest where the tuskers were found.

One point about the legend which has always impressed me is that Selous and other famous old hunters accepted it without question. Today there are still many experts who are impressed by the evidence. I was interested recently to find such a careful naturalist as Dr. Maurice

Burton quoting a well-authenticated example of elephants having dragged a dead comrade through the jungle all night. Dr. Burton has investigated many animal legends. Some he found to be correct. In all there was a foundation of truth.

How did this most persistent of African legends originate? The earliest reference I have discovered in print is in a work by Andrew Battell, an Englishman who travelled in Angola early in the seventeenth century. Battell related that the Portuguese found heaps of tusks in the bush. Perhaps this was the birth of the legend which others, thinking wistfully of the valuable ivory, have embroidered after the fashion of treasure tales. On the other hand, I think this legend has the foundation of truth which Maurice Burton found in so many remarkable animal stories.

The elephant legend is based on two well-known facts. The first is that natives still appear from time to time with heavy loads of valuable tusks; tusks which have obviously not been cut from newly-killed elephants. “We found them in the bush,” say the natives; that is their story and they stick to it. But nothing will persuade them to lead a white man to the source of the endless supply.

The second indisputable fact is that dead elephants, apart from those shot or trapped, are seldom found. Now an elephant is a difficult thing to hide. Some parts of Africa are still alive with elephants; their giant spoor are seen for miles round every waterhole, and a herd, stampeding along the horizon, looks like an express train. Elephants in the wild state live for about fifty years, so that in the very large herds there must be deaths every month. Where do the dying elephants go? According to the legend they know that death is upon them. Trumpeting the shrill call of death they vanish into the secret valley where the

huge skeletons of their ancestors lie whitening in the sun.

Some colour is lent to the legend by the fact that when the elephants kill a human being they bury the body under a heap of grass. It is argued that such intelligent animals may have burial customs of their own. Hunters have also watched the elephant cows succouring their bull when wounded; squirting water down its throat; covering it with branches to give protection from heat and flies; guarding the body long after death.

Colonel J. L. F. Tweedie, a former district commissioner in the Sudan, offered a solution of the mystery from his own experience. Ivory was brought to his headquarters to be weighed and registered, and he noticed that one consignment was badly scorched. He discovered that the natives had located a herd of elephant in a swamp which had dried out. They had fired the tall grass all-round the herd, so that the panic-stricken elephants had all perished within the wall of flame. Colonel Tweedie suggested that a traveller coming upon the bones of the herd long afterwards might well imagine that he had stumbled on an elephant graveyard.

Sir William Dowers, Governor of Uganda twenty-six years ago, estimated that about two thousand elephants died of natural causes in Africa every year. He agreed that practically the only dead elephants he had seen were those which had been shot, trapped, speared or fallen over cliffs. Elephants do meet with fatal accidents. Some years ago three elephants were killed by lightning in Northern Rhodesia. Others have died after being bitten by snakes. Sir William Dowers, however, was against the cemetery theory. He believed that the dying elephants were submerged in rivers and swamps. And this belief was supported by an engineer who sank the caissons for the Blue Nile Bridge

at Khartoum. He found layers of elephant bones twenty feet below the river bed.

Other opponents of the graveyard legend say that it is easy to explain the absence of dead elephants. A feeble, dying elephant may be pulled down by a pack of lions and the flesh eaten; then come the hyenas, and even the largest bones are cracked and scattered and finally covered by the undergrowth. Along river banks the crocodiles join in the feast. Thus a great tusker is reduced to fragments and lost.

Carl Mauch of Zimbabwe fame, the German explorer and prospector of the eighteen-sixties, supported the legend. He was travelling in Bechuanaland with a native guide, and they entered a narrow kloof which broadened out into a huge, deep gorge. It was littered for miles with bones which Mauch identified as relics of elephants; but there were no tusks. Mauch described this place as the elephant cemetery of Bechuanaland.

I do not know whether Mauch's cemetery has been rediscovered. When I was in Bechuanaland with a desert expedition in 1936, however, I heard a Kalahari tale which links up with the cemetery legend. Somewhere in the Kalahari, they say, there is a huge volcanic crater where men, animals and wagons have all been trapped. A German hunter named Erlanger declared that he had fallen into this great pit with his wagon. Escaping with bruises, he had found a stream of water and lived on the provisions he carried in his wagon. Then he explored the crater and came across a number of elephant skeletons complete with tusks. After a few days in this queer prison he hammered wooden pegs into the steep walls and climbed out. Bushmen guided him back to civilisation. No doubt the ordeal of Erlanger has been exaggerated with time, but there are so many geographical oddities in the Kalahari that the crater may indeed exist.

Tippo Tib, greatest of the old Zanzibar slave traders, was said to have discovered a huge “ivory valley” where thousands of East African elephants had gone to die. British officials are supposed to have offered him ten per cent of the value of all ivory recovered if he would show them the hoard; but he trusted no white man and the secret was thought to have died with him. Tippo Tib had a nephew named Mohammed Abdulla, however, who was just as great a scoundrel as the uncle. In 1927 Mohamed Abdulla approached the Uganda government with a story of ivory buried long before the white man came. He refused to supply details beyond a statement that he had been given the ivory by a dead friend. Was it Tippo Tib’s hoard? Mohammed Abdulla secured the assurances he sought, and it is on record that he produced more than one hundred magnificent tusks.

Major P. H. G. Powell-Cotton, a pioneer hunter in British East Africa, always maintained that he had found an unmistakable elephant graveyard in the Turkana country. “I was surprised to find the whole countryside scattered with remains, the fitful sun, as it struggled through the clouds, lighting up glistening bones in every direction,” he wrote. “My guide called this ‘the place where the elephants come to die’, and assured me it was no fell disease which had decimated a vast herd, but that, when the elephants felt sick, they would deliberately come long distances to lay their bones in this spot. The place was well-known to the Turkana, who regularly visited it to carry off the tusks.”

Even more convincing is the evidence of Major J. F. Cumming, a district commissioner in the Sudan, who wrote an account of an elephant cemetery for a scientific journal only a few years ago. Major Cumming shot an elephant in a herd along the Upper Nile, and returned next day to cut out the tusks. But the

elephant had disappeared. It was resting under eighteen inches of earth, and everywhere Major Cumming found the tusk marks of the gravediggers.

I flew low over a genuine elephant graveyard during World War II, and one of my companions, who had been there on foot, told me the story. It was Lake Bangweolo in Northern Rhodesia. Through the smoke haze of bush fires I saw this vast, weird lake; sixteen hundred square miles of shallow water and tortuous waterways; paths of logs through the swamps; canoes and huge banana trees and rushes; birds in myriads, ducks and herons, cranes and marabou storks. I thought that I could detect black baboons moving in the trees, but my companion said they were the pygmies. He pointed out their villages, huts on stilts on large and small islands in this fantastic water-jungle. And he said there were other islands in Bangweolo where only the elephants were at home. They were cut off in the rainy season. Elephants were born on those islands, and they died there. Hunters dared not follow them, for the rushes and thickets made these elephant sanctuaries more dangerous to man than the Addo bush. Somewhere near the western shore of Bangweolo, according to local legend, there is an elephant cemetery with a wealth in ivory. I was content to look down on this breeding ground and burial place of the elephants – but I wished the Lodestar had not flown so fast. It was one of those tantalising glimpses that the air gives and takes away.

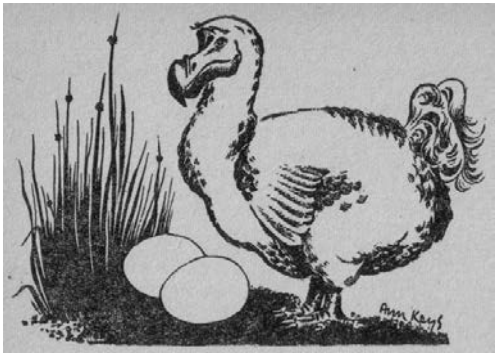
All that can be said with certainty is that the sick, dying elephant knows a great thirst which must be slaked. Thus many elephants in a district may follow the same trail in their last hours; the path that leads most easily to water. Having drunk for the last time their great bodies may sink into the swamp or pool which has become the cemetery of the herd. And so

they vanish until a very dry year reveals the skeletons and tusks.

“He has gone to die by himself,” say the natives when an old and well-known bull elephant disappears at last from the tribal areas. “How would we know where he has gone?”

It may be a myth, but I like to think that the heap of skeletons in Ivory Valley grows larger year by year. Cullen Gouldsbury’s poem gives a vivid impression of the secret cemetery:

Pile upon Pile of bleaching bone, and
a foul miasmic breath,
With now and again a mighty moan to
break on the hush of death –
Sluggish streams, and the silver beams
of a silent moon on high –
God forfend I should meet my end in
the Place where the elephants die.



Chapter 18
THE DODO EGG

For food the seamen hunt the flesh of
feathered fowl,
They tap the palms, the round-sterned
dodos they destroy;
The Parrot's life they spare, that he
may scream and howl
And thus his fellows to imprisonment
decoy.

Translated from a verse in the log book of Captain Willem van West Zanen, 1601.

I AM always fascinated by rarities, and it was an extreme rarity which Miss M. Courtenay Latimer lifted gently from her safe at my request. Miss Courtenay Latimer is the Director of the East London Museum, and the first *coelacanth* netted in South African waters bears her name *(Latimera Chalumnae);* for she realized the scientific value of the brilliant steel-blue fish and brought Professor Smith on the scene. However, the dodo egg which Miss Latimer showed me is probably worth more than any fish.

Some oologists, as the egg experts call themselves, regard this large cream-coloured egg as the most important survival in the whole egg world. It must be worth hundreds of pounds; more than the pale greenish egg of the great auk; or the foot-long, ivory-coloured fossil egg of Madagascar's *Aepyornis titan,* largest bird in the ancient world. In fact, the only egg which might rival the dodo egg would be a perfect moa egg. Fragments of these

eggs have been found in New Zealand caves, and have fetched high prices, but a complete moa egg has never been found.

Both the moa and the dodo became extinct at about the same time, late in the seventeenth century. The home of the dodo, the grey dodo with the massive beak, was Mauritius. Similar birds were found on the neighbouring islands of Reunion, where there was a white dodo, and Rodriguez, where an unsociable, long-legged dodo was rightly named the solitaire. Obviously the islands were once a single land mass, and the birds must have developed their local differences in isolation.

A plump bird was the dodo, as large as a goose, but in reality a gigantic, ground pigeon. (The late Dr. Robert Broom, the scientist, regarded Delalande's green pigeon of South Africa as a living link.) On islands where the birds have no natural enemies and no need to use their wings they tend to become flightless. Then man arrives and the birds are doomed.

The dodo ought to have survived longer than it did, for the Dutch cooks in the ship that took possession of Mauritius could do nothing with such a tough and unpalatable bird. Unfortunately later ships landed pigs, which smashed the eggs, and cats and dogs which ate the dodos, young and old. Some seamen were so eager to taste fresh food that they joined in the massacre.

Sir Thomas Herbert, an early English visitor, said of the dodo: "Her body is round and fat, which occasions the slow pace; and so great that few of them weigh less than fifty pounds; meat it is with some, but better to the eye than to the stomach, such as only a strong appetite can vanquish. It is of a melancholy visage, as sensible of Nature's injury in framing so massive a body to be directed by wings, such indeed as are unable to hoist her from the ground. Her stomach is fiery

so that she can easily digest stones, in that and shape not a little resembling the ostrich."

Naturalists have studied the descriptions written by those who saw the living dodo without gleaning much scientific information. Its habits and diet remain a mystery, though it is known that the dodo nested on the ground and laid one egg at a time. Francois Cauche, a French visitor in the seventeenth century, said the egg was the same size as that of the Cape pelican. I once saw pelicans nesting on an island in False Bay, but it did not occur to me to study their eggs. In the same account Cauche said the egg was the size of a halfpenny bread roll, though I suspect the translator of turning the centimes into English currency. Nowhere else could I find any details of the eggs, and Cauche's evidence is vague and slender.

The story of Miss Courtenay Latimer's egg is a romance of the sea. This dodo egg is an heirloom, and it has been in the possession of her family for more than a century. Back in the eighteen-forties, and Mr. L. O. Bean of Port Elizabeth was pursuing his hobbies of zoology and botany. He introduced a number of plants into South Africa, and he was aided in his activities by Captain van Syker, an owner and skipper of a sailing vessel trading among the Indian Ocean islands.

Mr. Bean's daughter Lavinia collected birds' eggs. One day in 1846 Captain van Syker told Lavinia that he was calling at Mauritius and promised to bring her an egg from there. He returned on January 15, 1847 and handed the delighted girl a large egg. He had secured it from a shipwrecked sailor who had settled "on the island. This man owned two of the eggs, and he was unwilling to sell them. However, he owed Captain van Syker money and he parted with one egg in settlement of the debt. The sailor told the captain that it was the egg of a bird which had been exterminated by Dutch sailors.

The last of the dodos were still waddling about the more remote parts of Mauritius in 1681, but there is evidence to show that by 1693 the whole species had been exterminated. While I was travelling about this large island some years ago I heard a remarkable creole legend to the effect that the dodo still lived in the remote forests high in the mountains of the interior. But I fear that the dodo will not be rediscovered in the sensational manner of the New Zealand huia. The dodo has been dead for two and a half centuries.

Lavinia Bean was Miss Latimer's great aunt. Before she died in 1935 at the age of ninety-eight she gave the egg to Miss Latimer; probably the only dodo's egg in the world.

Of course there have been doubts about the egg, difficult to refute because of the absence of other dodo eggs for comparison. In the scanty literature on the dodo, old authors mentioned a reputed dodo egg in a Bordeaux collection, and two more owned by a Russian naturalist. These three eggs appear to have vanished long ago. Miss Latimer has made inquiries in every possible direction without even hearing a rumour of another dodo egg.

Some of the scientists who gathered in East London in 1945 for the South African Museums Conference thought the egg might be an abnormal ostrich egg. Miss Latimer then set to work to defend the good name of her heirloom. If you put an egg under a magnifying glass you can study the "pitting pattern", which comes up as clearly as a human thumb-print. She found that the dodo egg displayed a "pitting pattern" similar to that of the pigeon egg, as Dr. Broom had suggested. Moreover, it was shaped and coloured more like the pigeon egg than the ostrich egg. (The dodo, you will remember, was an ungainly member of the pigeon family.) Miss Latimer found that the

pitting on her dodo egg was coarse, close and reddish in colour, whereas all the ostrich eggs she examined were pitted sparsely with fine greyish pit holes. She examined one hundred and twenty-five abnormal ostrich eggs from a farm, and another thirty odd abnormal eggs from the Port Elizabeth Museum. Her dodo egg remained unique in its pitting pattern, texture, shape, form and colour.

So I agree heartily with Miss Courtenay Latimer when she sums up: “In the light of the evidence supplied and of the history of this egg, I am satisfied that it is a dodo egg.” The history is convincing. There have been practical jokes in the world of science, but there was no reason at all why Captain van Syker should have brought an ostrich egg from the island of the dodo for the daughter of his friend in Port Elizabeth. And if he had, the magnifying glass would have revealed the fake.

Bones of the dodo are not so rare as the eggs, though they must rank among the most valuable bones known to science. I believe the only complete, authentic dodo skeleton is one which I gazed upon with awe in the museum at Port Louis, Mauritius. Towards the end of last century a number of dodo bones were recovered from a swamp and sent to London. Experts under Sir Edward Newton at the British Museum then restored and mounted two skeletons, one perfect example for the island museum and another almost perfect skeleton for themselves.

A stuffed dodo, which had been decaying for years in the Ashmolean Museum, Oxford, was thrown on a bonfire two centuries ago. Someone saved the head and a foot, precious relics today. There are realistic pictures of the dodo, however, for living dodos were taken to Europe in the seventeenth century and painted by

Roelandt Savery in Holland and other artists in England.

Miss Latimer recently acquired a life-size dodo effigy from the British Museum for the East London Museum. In the Durban Museum there is a fairly complete dodo skeleton. It was in 1919 that Mr. Chubb, the curator, heard of this skeleton in private hands in Mauritius. He managed to buy it for the ridiculous sum of forty pounds. Between the wars, dodo bones amounting to about one-third of a skeleton, were sold in London for two hundred and fifty pounds. The Durban skeleton includes the complete tail bones, the last rib, and the bones of the tiny wings. It has been valued at more than a thousand pounds. Interest in the dodo is proved by the thousands of postcards of the bird which the museum has sold. Visitors recall the pictures in "Alice in Wonderland" when they see the enormous hooked beak.

This beak, incidentally, is of great scientific importance, for nothing else like it exists in the bird kingdom. It must have evolved as a result of a diet which demanded strong crushing power. As a whole, the dodo presents a picture of laziness and stupidity, and a notice in the British Museum points the moral: "The dodo is illustrated here as illustrating quite a serious principle: that in wild nature the creature which finds itself in easy surroundings and allows its powers to fall into disuse is likely to be exterminated when faced with new and more exacting conditions." No wonder the scientific name for the dodo is *Didus ineptus.*

Madagascar was another island where the birds lived too easily. I have already mentioned the *Aepyornis titan,* a bird so large that an ostrich would have been dwarfed beside it. Sinbad's story of the fabulous roc, which carried off elephants to feed its young, may have been based on the *Aepyornis.* Strange to say, the

Aepyornis was still alive in the twelfth century, A.D., and was probably exterminated by Indonesian invaders about that time. Several nearly complete skeletons and many fragments have been found.

This monstrous, wingless bird stood over twelve feet high on its massive legs. The hunters who killed it may have been brave men; or perhaps it was a brainless bird without the deadly kick of the ostrich. Certainly it laid the largest egg known to science, equal to one hundred and fifty hens' eggs.

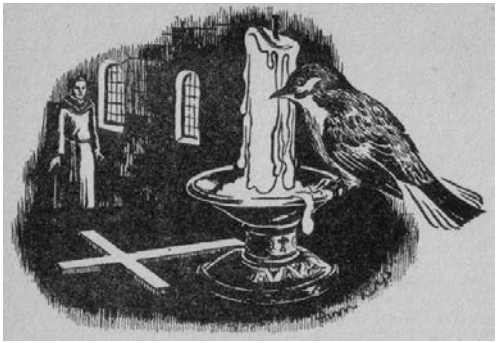
Shortly before World War II an American collector secured an *Aepyornis* egg at a price which he would not disclose. The modern story of that egg went back to 1912, when a savage herdsman in the Tandroy area of Madagascar saw a white object drifting along a flooded river. He reached out for it, saw that it was an egg, and remembered the tribal story of the mighty bird that had once roamed the land.

Scientists who examined the scene decided that after a thousand years the egg must have been washed out of a protecting alluvial deposit by the heavy rains. The finder had given the egg to his chief, who had taken it to a white trader in the nearest town and received five head of cattle in exchange. That immense egg, a foot long, ten inches across, pockmarked by sand and insects, went from hand to hand. Finally a missionary took it to San Francisco in the hope of raising funds for his church. He was successful. And the collector had gained one of the finest specimens of the *Aepyornis* egg. But there are twenty-five other known specimens in the museums of the world. It is not unique, like the dodo egg. Since that discovery French district administrators in Madagascar have been offering the natives a reward of ten thousand francs for every *Aepyornis* egg they bring in. I believe one happy man handed over a

perfect fossil egg not long ago and claimed the reward.

Cape Town has an *Aepyornis titan* egg. It reposed in the museum cellar for many years, until a palaeontologist recognised the value of it and placed it in a showcase. Museums do not always realise what they have got. I know a wise old taxidermist who was serving his apprenticeship in Scotland when a woman whose husband was a sailor offered him the skin of a strange bird for a few shillings. He refused it, and the skin was thrown away. That bird lingered in his mind. Years afterwards he realised that it was a great auk. The woman had called it a hawk, and he was not interested in hawks.

No doubt he would have dealt with a dodo egg in the same way in his youth. But relics of the queer, extinct birds of the Indian Ocean islands turn up once in a lifetime. Fame and fortune await the man who goes to Mauritius and discovers a dodo egg.



Chapter 19
QUEER BEHAVIOUR

"ALWAYS SOMETHING new out of Africa," remarked Pliny the Elder nearly two thousand years ago. In those days, and for long afterwards, you could tell almost any story about Africa, and the credulous people of Europe would take it as gospel. Last century, with the growth of science, came disbelief. And the pendulum swung too far in that direction.

One of the old tales, certainly more than three centuries old, dealt with the queer behaviour of the honey-guide. Some naturalists of Darwin's time permitted themselves a polite smile whenever this thundering lie was told. It turned out to be true, of course, though the whole mystery has not yet been solved. I believe that the last word on the honey-guide may be far more remarkable than the first.

No doubt you have heard of this drab but lively bird. Possibly you have seen it leading human beings to the bees, and. listened to its insistent, persuasive "Cherr, cherr!" Sparrman the Swede, who made so many zoological discoveries at the Cape, received the credit for describing the black-throated honey-guide *(Indicator indicator,)* now known as Sparrman's honey-guide. But he was not the first in the field.

Father dos Santos, a Portuguese priest stationed at Sofala towards the end of the sixteenth century, observed a bird that often flew into his wooden church. "There is a kind of birds like canary birds, but with long tails, which live on wax, and

search in the wild untilled places for bee-hives, whereof there are many in holes in the ground and in hollow trees," Dos Santos wrote. "When they find a hive with honey in it they go to the highways in search of people to lead them to it, which they do by going before them and crying and beating their wings from bough to bough, till they find the hive or bee-hole. The natives of this land, who know these birds, as soon as they catch sight of them, follow them to gather the honey and the profit that the birds reap from this is that they eat the small pieces and scrapings of the wax and honeycomb and the dead bees that are left behind. These birds are called by the Africans 'sazu' ; they are of the same size and almost the same colour as a goldfinch and have a long tail. Many times they have come in at the windows of our church at Sofala, and we have found them eating the little pieces of wax left in the candlesticks."

A pretty touch that last one, and one I want you to remember. The honey-guide may provide the solution to a medical mystery, and the wax is important.

I found another early account of the bird in the work of Father Jeronimo Lobo, the Jesuit who went to Abyssinia in 1625 as a missionary. "The moroc or honey-bird is furnished by nature with a peculiar instinct or faculty of discovering honey," declared Father Lobo. "When the moroc has discovered any honey he repairs immediately to the roadside, and when he sees a traveller, sings and claps his wings, making many motions to invite him to follow him; and when he perceives his coming, flies before him from tree to tree, till he comes to the place where the bees have stored their treasure, and then begins to sing melodiously. The Abyssinian takes the honey, without failing to leave part of it for the bird, to reward him for his information."

Sparrman, who was at the Cape in 1775, gave a more detailed description, and proved to be an accurate observer. He was the first to mention the partnership of the bird with the *ratel* or honey badger, the tough killer which is unfortunately as fond of sheep as it is of honey. Sometimes the *ratel is* able to reach the wild hive and tear it open with its long nails. When it fails, it gnaws: and bites the trunk of the tree in its rage; and Sparrman noted that the Hottentots found these marks useful when searching for honey.

It was a great step forward when the honey-guides decided to lead human beings, as well as the *ratel*, to the honey. For there were few nests which the natives could not reach, whereas the *ratel* must often disappoint the honey-guide.

Sparrman called the honey-guide *cuculus indicator* or bee-cuckow. There he was wrong, though only in recent years have the naturalists taken the honey-guides out of the cuckoo family and set them up as *indicatoridae.* The mistake arose owing to the parasitic habits of the honey-guides (which leave their eggs in the nests of certain barbets and swallows) and the structure of the toes, which resemble the cuckoos. Sparrman reported that the honey-guide was like the common sparrow, but was larger, lighter in colour, with a yellow spot on each shoulder. He confessed that when he first heard the story he regarded it as a fable. This view was strengthened by an experience in Groot Vaders Bosch in the Swellendam district, when he accompanied a lad who followed a honey-guide but failed to locate any honey. To his surprise, however, he confirmed the story later.

Morning and evening, Sparrman found, were the times when the bird showed the greatest inclination to give forth its greeting cry of “cherr! cherr! cherr!” and arouse the attention of the *ratel,* the Hottentots and the colonists. When someone joined the bird it would fly on

slowly towards the plunder, repeating its cry continually. It was necessary to take great care not to frighten the bird by any unusual noise or by going after it in a crowd. The Bushmen (or "Boshiesman" of Sparrman's narrative) answered the bird now and then with a soft and gentle whistle by way of letting it know that it was still being followed. When the bees-nest was far away, the bird made long hops, waiting for its companion between each flight and calling to him to come on. Near the nest the bird repeated its cry more often and with greater earnestness. When the human being found the ground difficult and lagged behind, the bird would fly back, show its impatience with redoubled cries, and upbraid its follower for being so tardy.

"Finally, when it has come to the bees-nest', whether this be built in the cleft of a rock, in a hollow tree, or in some cavity in the earth," Sparrman wrote, "it hovers over the spot for the space of a few seconds, a circumstance which I myself have been eyewitness of twice. Afterwards it sits in silence and for the most part concealed in some neighbouring tree or bush in expectation of what may happen, and with a view to coming in for a share of the booty."

Several later observers have complained that the honey-guide often fails to indicate the exact position of the honey. Sparrman, however, insisted that the bird always hovered over the nest before hiding itself. Moreover, the follower could always; be sure that the nest was very near when the bird fell silent.

Sparrman, like Father Lobo, mentioned the custom of leaving some of the hive as a reward for the bird. He also noted that the bird regarded the young bees as the most delicate morsels, preferring them to the honey. Sparrman wrote: "I was informed by my Boshies-men, as well as by the Colonists, that a man who makes it his constant business to go after the bees

should not at first be too grateful and generous to this officious bird, but leave for it only just as much as will serve to stimulate its appetite, by which means it will be induced, in hopes of obtaining a more liberal reward, to discover another swarm of bees."

Sparrman wished to shoot a honey-guide for museum purposes, and promised his Bushmen glass beads and tobacco if they would help him. They refused to betray the bird. "It gave me a great pleasure, as it showed that these people were in general possessed of good and grateful hearts," Sparrman commented.

One point which Sparrman missed was the widespread legend suggesting that the honey-guide is a treacherous little bird which sometimes leads unsuspecting humans towards such dangerous creatures as snakes, lions, leopards or even elephants. Many believe it to this day, and they are fortified in their superstition by the casualties which have occurred now and then while following the honey-guide.

No doubt the belief arose long ago when some hard-hearted native cheated the bird out of its share of the honeycomb. Surely, it must have been argued, such an intelligent bird would find some way of revenge. In the days when wild beasts were more plentiful the innocent antics of the honey-guide must have led its followers into danger now and again. So the bird was blamed for pure coincidence.

Layard, the Cape Town museum curator a century ago, accepted this libellous story at first; but an article he published brought contradictions from several parts of the country. Mrs. Barber, an observer in the Eastern Province, informed Layard that her nine brothers were all hunters, and not one of them had known the honey-guide to act in such a despicable manner. Often they had startled various creatures of the forests while following the guide; but the bird had flown on towards the honey

without taking any notice of the animal which had been disturbed. One of her brothers passed through a drove of wild pigs in dense forest near the Kowie. The frightened pigs rushed madly in every direction; but the man, wishing to test the popular belief, kept his eye on the honey-guide. The bird went on steadily, giving out the same call. “There is an alteration in the notes of the voice when the honey-guide arrives at the hive,” Mrs. Barber wrote. “The old bee-hunter recognises this change at once. Now this alteration is never heard when animals are startled accidentally.”

Nevertheless the legend of the honey-guide’s revenge is told wherever the bird is found. Livingstone the missionary was greatly interested in the story, and cross-examined more than a hundred of his native carriers on this very point. One man declared that he had been led to an elephant; all the others acquitted the bird of any evil motive. Livingstone summed up: “I am quite convinced that the majority of people who commit themselves to its guidance are led to honey and to it alone.”

I found in the “Grahamstown Journal” for November 1865 a perfect illustration of the sort of experience which gave rise to the old belief. Four white lads were gathering berries in a kloof outside the town when they heard the calls of a honey-guide and followed it. Instead of a hive they found a puff-adder, which they killed.

Later the bird called again and they were led to a cave. The entrance was low, but they crawled in and lit a fire, probably so that the smoke would protect them from the bees they expected to find there. “Then a savage growl made the cave tremble,” reported the newspaper. “They saw the fiery eyes and lashing tail of a leopard a few feet away. Putting the fire between themselves and the leopard, they escaped.”

Bushmen of the Kalahari make cautious use of the honey-guide. According to their folklore, a Bushman followed a honey-guide to a bush where a lion was crouching. The Bushman escaped by throwing his tanned loin cloth to the lion; but he lost his bow and arrows and quiver. So now the Bushmen are always on guard when the bird calls. They follow, but they look round every bush for lions.

Father Jerome da Sorrento, an early visitor to the Congo, described the greater honey-guide and remarked that it sometimes led the natives to a lion. Evidently the followers of the guide have had unhappy encounters in many territories through the centuries.

A honey-guide will sometimes lead to a dead animal. Delegorgue, the French naturalist, observed this habit in South Africa and declared that the bird became interested in feeding on the flies and maggots and forgot the original quest for honey.

Major E. L. Haydock, an ornithologist living in Northern Rhodesia, investigated the allegation of the honey-guide's treachery. Reliable natives informed him that when the bird led to a lion or leopard, the animal was always asleep. Flies hovering over the animal might be mistaken for bees by the honey-guide – a dangerous mistake, but certainly not deliberate.

Of course it is possible that the follower might stumble upon a lion and the bees' nest at the same moment. He would be more likely to remember the lion than the bees, and the poor honey-guide would be blamed.

Certain tribes in Rhodesia relate a piece of folklore to account for the honey-guide's habits. The bird went in search of a wife in Beetown, and the bees first provided one and then took her away. "All right then – I shall go and tell tales about you to all the people who pass along the road," threatened the honey guide. And he still

carries out his threat, as the bees know to their cost.

Bambemba tribesmen of Northern Rhodesia carry the heart of a honey-guide with other medicines in a horn when seeking honey. They will kill honey-guides only for this purpose, and inflict severe penalties for wanton killing.

Although the story of the honey-guide and the *ratel* is well-established, few white people have ever seen the two working together. Doubt has been cast on it owing to the fact that the *ratel* is regarded as a nocturnal animal, whereas the honey-guide never operates after dusk. However, it has been proved that the *ratel* does come out in daylight, and that it is capable of climbing trees.

In the Albany Museum, Grahamstown, there is an unpublished notebook kept by the celebrated Dr. W. G. Atherstone, the man who identified the first South African diamond. A settler named Holden Bowker informed Dr. Atherstone in 1853 that he had shot a *ratel* robbing one of his beehives placed in a tree twelve feet above the ground. Bowker added that he thought the guiding habit of the honey-guide "probably originated with the *ratel,* who climbs trees to get nests and leaves the comb scattered about where the Indicator eats either the grub or the wax."

The same valuable notebook records the experience of a farmer named Oosthuizen at Bushman's River who once "saw a *ratel* following a honey bird and making the same grunt that a Hottentot does."

Sir Robert Tredgold, Chief Justice of Southern Rhodesia, is one of the few living observers who have watched this partnership. He was at Inyati, forty miles from Salisbury, when he heard the grunting of a *ratel* and the chatter of a honey-guide. The sounds came closer, until he was able to identify an adult honey-guide *(Indicator indicator)* definitely leading a *ratel.* The *ratel* kept

responding with a gutteral growl whenever the bird gave its chatter call. Unfortunately the *ratel* caught sight of Sir Robert and fled, so that the bees' nest remained untouched.

Haydock collected evidence of honey-guides calling to baboons and monkeys. Sometimes the baboons followed, but the monkeys could never be persuaded. Haydock also saw a mongoose turning a deaf ear to the bird. Baboons rob a hive by making a dash, seizing what honey they can lay hands on, and then waiting until the bees have calmed down before raiding the comb again.

Natives of the Eastern Province say that when the honey-guide is approaching a hive it will nod its head in the right direction and point with its beak. It gives warning of the presence of a wild animal by making a whirring noise with its wings. Zulus call the honey-guide the "talkative, scolding woman".

Mr. R. B. Woosman, who watched the honey-guide in the Ngami area of Bechuanaland, stated that the bird often came into his camp to find a helper. He had followed the bird as far as half a mile before reaching the honey. The bird would wait until he was within twenty yards of it and then dart off again. Sometimes a bird would fly into the very tree in which the hive was situated, perching for a moment close to the hole and chattering loudly. Then, as the man came up, the bird would go into hiding and remain silent. Mr. Woosman tried to observe the honey-guide enjoying its reward, but he was never successful. As long as he was there the bird kept to its hiding-place.

Sir John Kirk, the Scottish doctor and naturalist who accompanied Livingstone's second expedition, was another keen observer of the honey-guide. He found that when a man disappointed the bird by following for a time and then turning away, the bird would come back and offer

to point out a different hive in another area. “It will point to tame bees in a bark hive as readily as forest bees,” Kirk recorded. “The object the bird has in view is clearly young bees. It will guide to a nest containing no honey, and is delighted with a comb containing the grubs.”

It is clear from reports of many observers that the honey-guide is a dogged, persistent, nagging little bird. One man walked deliberately for several miles in the opposite direction to that indicated, but the bird kept flying at him, twittering incessantly. It will circle a wagon with shrill cries, almost dashing into the face of the driver.

Apparently the guiding is done only by the male bird. Mr. C. J. Skead of the Kaffrarian Museum noted “call sites” where a male honey-guide took up its post day after day for certain months every year. It remained there, whistling “vic-tor! vic-tor! vic-tor!” so loudly that it could be heard nine hundred yards away. One bird relieved another at the site, and females visited the males stationed there. Strange behaviour which observers noted at the call site included “rustle flights”. A bird would fly in circles, making dramatic upward and downward sweeps, uttering loud “whurrs” and then diving in spectacular fashion back to its perch. No one has accounted for this display.

Tough skins and inner eyelids protect the honey-guides from bee-stings. (The ratel, too, has a skin which is hard to penetrate.) A peculiarity of the young honey-guide is the pair of hooks on the end of the bill. These drop off in the course of time; and there is a theory that the purpose is to grip and eject unwanted birds from the nest.

By the way, there is a point to remember if ever you follow the honey-guide and loot a comb of wild honey. This honey differs to some extent from “tame” honey in that it raises a tremendous thirst. Eat sparingly, and see that your water-bottle is full.

Sparrman drew attention to a mystery which has not yet been solved. He said that while there were plenty of wild bees round about Cape Town, the honey-guide in the Peninsula did not indicate the hives. People in Cape Town knew nothing of the bird or its peculiar habits.

Dr. J. M. Winterbottom, author of recent field handbooks on South African birds, told me that Sparrman's statement still held good. Sparrman's honey-guide and the lesser honey-guide were both found in the Cape Peninsula, but no one had reported guiding habits.

It seems that the honey-guide is moved to act as guide only in natural forests. It must have guided Van Riebeeck's men in the very early days, when the Peninsula was heavily wooded. Later it gave up the habit. There are still patches of forest, such as Kirstenbosch, where the honey-guide has been identified; but the unmistakable guiding call is heard no more.

Dr. Herbert Friedmann, curator of birds at the Smithsonian Institution in Washington, D.C., has an explanation of this mystery. He is the greatest living authority on the honey-guides, and has followed the birds in many parts of Southern Africa. He has put forward a theory of "associative memory". At various times the honey-guide observes animals and men opening the nests of the wild bees and eating the honey. In the course of time it comes to associate the sight of these animal and human raiders with bees' nests; and so at last the bird appears to be excited whenever it sees the honey gatherers.

Now suppose you go to an area (such as the Cape Peninsula) where the *ratel* does not exist and man has long ago given up the search for wild honey. The honey-guide cannot possibly associate animals or humans with bees in such areas, and so it does not guide. There must be continuity. In less civilised areas the natives help to

arouse the “associative memory” of the bird, imitating the grunt of the *ratel* and hitting the trees as though they were chopping open the bees’ nests. Such help is not essential, however, as the birds often approach the humans without any invitation.

Friedmann does not credit the honey-guide with any purpose or the ability to plan. Many examples of one animal attracting another of a different species in a feeding relationship are to be found in the world of nature. The European robin approaches certain animals, and humans, in the hope that they will scare up insects. Like the honey-guide, it has displaced wild mammals by humans. The change is not so dramatic as it appears to the onlookers. And the behaviour of the honey-guide, which seems to be so intelligent, is really on an instinctive level.

According to Friedmann, the honey-guide may or may not know where it is going. One careful observer followed a honey-guide for more than four miles, measuring the circuitous route afterwards. He found honey all right, but the nest was only half a mile from the point where the bird had first called to him. Obviously the bird was gambling on the chance of sighting bees.

My friend Walter Hoesch, companion on a scientific expedition into the Kaokoveld, author of the standard work on the birds of South West Africa, has a theory of his own about the honey-guide. He thinks that ages ago the honey-guide learnt to regard the bees as enemies, because of their stings. Thus the bird gives warning to this day of the presence of wild animals, snakes - and bees! In guiding men to these enemies, the honey-guide hoped to see the enemies eliminated. The honey and the comb were mere details in which the bird was not greatly interested.

Hoesch’s theory is not accepted by other ornithologists. Nevertheless, it is a fact that the honey-guides could not live on the honeycomb, wax and dead bees which

are left after they have led their followers successfully to a hive. They have other ways of securing wax and other insects to keep themselves going.

Hoesch points out that birds usually lead humans away from something – especially from their nests or their young. He emphasises the strangeness of a bird reversing the process and leading towards something. In his long career as bird-watcher he can remember only one other example; when two rollers led him with cries of excitement to a genet caught in a trap. Hoesch holds the view that the behaviour of the honey-guide was originally due to a state of excitement caused by a dangerous enemy, and that this excitement made it lead the human towards that enemy.

Africa has nine species of honey-guide, some extremely rare. All nine species have been located in the Belgian Congo. Friedmann believes that the family dates back to the time when the forest animals of Africa and India were more closely related. (There is evidence of a land bridge, now submerged, in the Indian Ocean.) One species of honey-guide is found in the Himalayas and another in the East Indies. These oriental birds, however, do not seem to exhibit the guiding impulse. The origin of the honey-guide is still a riddle. Although it is of great antiquity in Asia, it is possible that the bird evolved in Africa.

Among the Congo species is the lyre-tailed honey-guide, which is so rare that museum collectors were unable to secure a single specimen between 1915 and 1941. This bird makes a nasal “tooting” noise. Observers heard the call occasionally, but could not catch a glimpse of the bird. Mambuti pygmies knew it and called it *amazeke;* but though they were great hunters of honey, they declared that the bird had never helped them.

The lyre-tailed honey-guide dives noisily out of the sky with tail spread, uttering

siren-like notes. Natives in Gabun trapped a female at last for the American Museum of Natural History. They used honeycomb bait.

It is thought that the honey-guides of the Congo have not yet reached the stage of calling on man as an accomplice. They may be using squirrels and monkeys.

Rarest of all the honey-guides, perhaps, is Wahlberg's sharp billed honey-guide. This has been recorded in Abyssinia, in West Africa, and on a few occasions in South Africa; but the late Dr. Austin Roberts, a great field ornithologist, only saw it once in his life, in a Pretoria garden. The bird utters a "zeet zeet" cry in flight. It is probably a migrant.

Do you remember the honey-guides that flew into the church at Sofala centuries ago and ate the wax from the candlesticks? Friedmann discovered in the honey-guide's stomach a digestive process which may lead to a new method of treating tuberculosis. The bird is obviously able to digest beeswax with very great ease.

Dr. Friedmann asked himself whether this process might not be adapted to dissolve the waxy coating which makes the tuberculosis bacillus so hard to conquer.

Research at Washington has proved that the honey-guide possesses two micro-organisms in the intestinal tract. Now these birds are parasitic, as we have seen. They cannot acquire the micro-organisms from their parents or foster parents; thus they must pick them up from the wild honeycomb. Analysis of the comb has revealed the organisms. One day, perhaps, the noisy little honey-guide will be the hero of a fresh advance in the treatment of tuberculosis.



Chapter 20
SECRETS OF SOLITUDE

ONCE I spent a month on a lonely isle, hoping that someone would tell me the secrets of that solitude. On the last day I walked along the highest ridge, three peaks in swirling mist, peaks still clothed with ferns and gumwood and cabbage trees. I thought that I had torn the heart out of the place. From this primeval forest the island looked more dramatic than ever, a landscape of basalt needles and volcanic precipices, giving a feeling of insecurity. Dutch settlers knew this place well, and in their day it was covered with forest. Some of the trees and plants were found nowhere else in the world. A few rarities are still there, but man and the goats have taken most of them. The ocean is empty, for there is no land closer than seven hundred miles, and Africa is more than a thousand miles to the east. You have your bearings now? This is, perhaps, the oldest land mass on the face of the globe. Darwin revelled in it. These queer plants, the living insects and fossils, are links in the chain of creation. This is St. Helena, a fragment left in mid-ocean from the wreck of ancient world. “No other spot in the world is of such interest to the naturalist,” wrote the scientist Melliss.

Always my imagination has been gripped more firmly by the solitudes than the cities. I am no hermit, and often enough I long for remembered pleasures in Europe and the Americas. Yet always there comes a time when I find myself planning another journey to some far and lonely

place. In solitude, perhaps, we are more likely to discover what is within us. Yes, one finds wisdom in solitude, and a philosophy of life which the pavement crowds might not understand.

So now I was leaving another solitude. Many of my island friends were on board the Union Castle ship which took me away. They were different; happier and more excited than ever I had seen them on shore. In the liner's shop they were like children, buying avidly all those little things which were unknown in St. Helena's shops. They chatted over their drinks vivaciously, and because I was going away they told me island secrets they had never mentioned to me before. Certainly they enjoyed the ship's dinner of many courses, and the cinema on the aft deck. Once a month they took their dose of this exhilarating tonic, once a month when the liner called, and it seemed to me that there were some who would have fared badly without it. But what nostalgia did the tonic arouse?

Full moon at St. Helena that night, and for a long time I stood at my porthole gazing at the cliffs, the threatening, stupendous cliffs. Sometime in the night the anchor came up. It was farewell to Rock Rose and Rose Hill, Old Woman's Valley and Warren's Gut, Lazy Point and Bencoolen, Farm Lodge and Friar's Valley. And I lay there thinking of the day I had seen this lonely isle for the first time.

Fires were blazing along the water's edge from Prosperous Bay to Lemon Valley as my ship came round the steep coastline before dawn. These were the fires of the weekend fishermen who descend the bare and sombre precipices for a thousand, fifteen hundred feet with spikes and ropes to hook the conger eel, mackerel, silver fish and the delicious bull's-eye for their families. A risky game, especially when the men climb homewards with their sacks loaded. But they need the food, and

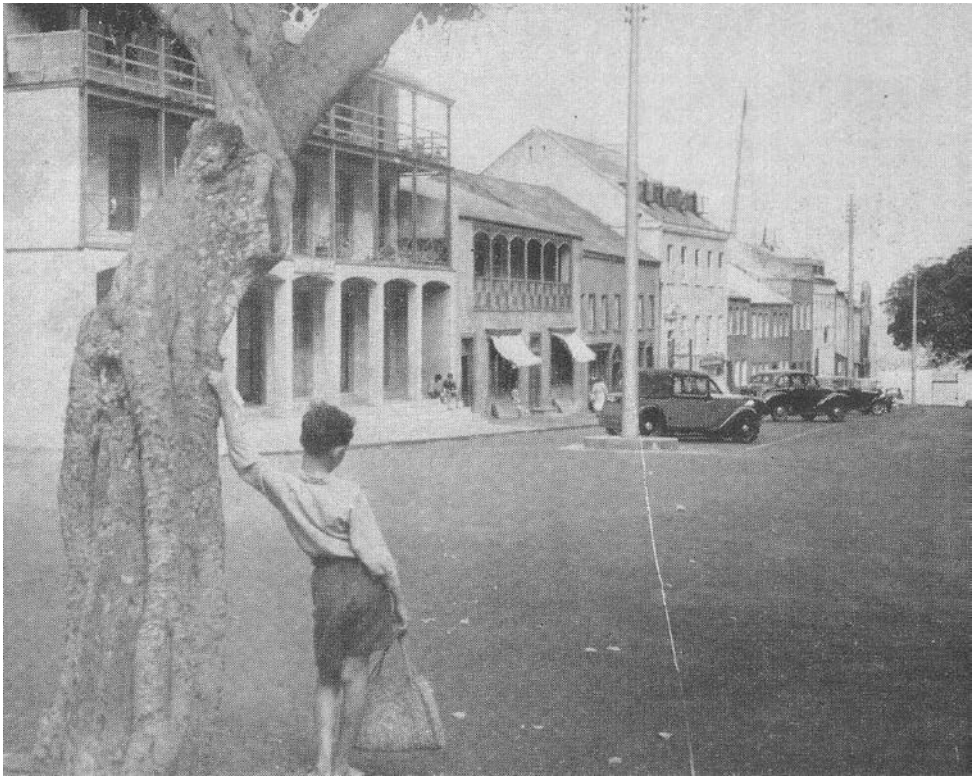
the St. Helena fish species are among the finest in the world.

At first glance St. Helena makes you shudder. (I had the same forebodings as I approached the still more remote island of Tristan da Cunha many years ago.) Seldom do the high, bird-haunted cliffs of St. Helena open to reveal the soft, rich farmlands, the quiet cottages and sedate mansions of the interior. It seems a prison, though behind the steep walls there is a little, isolated district of forty-seven square miles which has the charm of the old English countryside; the charm of last century, when a cottage was a true sanctuary.

As your ship comes up to the north-west coast anchorage off Jamestown you begin to observe the real St. Helena. Jamestown holds more of the strong meat of history, I think, than any other town in Britain's colonial possessions. You sense history in the old gun emplacements and powder magazines along the waterfront; in the seventeenth-century English castle with its moat, barring the valley. It is a scene already familiar to every collector who has studied the island's pictorial stamps.

Facing the town you behold a sheer precipice on each side, Munden's Hill on the east, Ladder Hill on the west. At sea level these hills open out to one-fifth of a mile, and the gap is filled by the sea wall and the Castle battlements. Over the old parapet you see the St. James's Church spire, with a metal fish instead of a weathercock. You glimpse the town in the narrow, triangular valley, white houses and great trees. Gaze long enough, and you are sure to see someone coming down the famous Jacob's Ladder of seven hundred steps linking the valley with the higher parts of the island.

"It's a noice lil oiland sir – but only us needs a bit more money." My boatman told me that in the nasal island twang while he was rowing me to the wharf. It is a fair summary of St. Helena from the



Jamestown holds more of the strong meat of history, I think than any other town in Britain's colonial possesions.

islander's point of view, and a good example of island speech.

I declared a bottle of French brandy and a bottle of sherry which I had bought at low sea prices on board the Union-Castle ship. "You're allowed one bottle free," smiled the Customs officer. "I'll charge you on the wine, because the duty is lower." I thought that was a pleasant welcome to the island. Then I drove to my hotel in Main Street.

At first glance, the Consulate Hotel in Jamestown gives no hint of the exotic meals which are daily contrived for its guests. True, the islander who leases the old building, Mr. George Moyce, has a girth which is obviously a tribute to the work of his wife and the cook, Mrs. Richards, in the old-fashioned kitchen. The hotel is a relic of the days of St. Helena's glory. The atmosphere reminded me vaguely, for some reason, of Schomberg's Hotel, the queer place in Surabaya which Joseph Conrad described so well in "Victory". Schomberg's had a garden, with large trees. And the Consulate has avocado pears and paw-paw, lemons and oranges, mango and banana trees growing in the courtyard; and a little beer garden with oil-drums serving as tables and asters and geraniums in tins. Fowls and chickens roam among the tables.

Moyce, wearing singlet and white shorts, led me round the hotel. When he stepped out on to the rickety balcony overlooking Main Street I feared an accident; but he knew his own weight and avoided the weak planks. Moyce also sketched his career from the time he left the island as a cabin-boy during World War I. He had served as cook in the old cable ship Britannia, and risen to chief steward of the cable mess on Ascension Island. Now he was giving the experience of a lifetime of catering to the Consulate guests.

"Why the Consulate?" I asked Moyce and many others on the island, but no one

could give me a convincing answer. It had been an hotel, under different names, for a long time and there was no record of a consul ever having lived there. Some said that (like Schomberg's) it had once been a brothel, but that was almost inevitable in a town which had known as many sailors as Jamestown. Let me hasten to add that during all this century at least the Consulate has had a blameless reputation. Only on days when the mail boat calls are the police brought in occasionally to remove a ship's steward from the bar.

George Moyce's bar looks after itself most of the time. You will always find a dozen bottles of beer on the counter, and some gin and a bitters shaker under the counter. Everyone knows the prices. Just help yourself and leave the money in the ash-tray. As you drink, you are at liberty to ponder over the wisdom of the framed motto that Moyce has provided for his patrons: "Don't marry for money, you can borrow it cheaper."

I never found any of the Chambertin, the famous burgundy that Napoleon loved, in the Consulate cellar; or the Bordeaux claret that was his second choice. I had to be content with a dry white wine from the Cape; which reminded me that Napoleon found consolation during his last days in a glass of Constantia and a biscuit.

Along one side of the courtyard at the Consulate runs a wooden gallery, as shaky as the front balcony. Nevertheless, this is the gangway to the bathrooms. Every morning I found Moyce feeding dry banana leaves into the furnaces of the geysers. One morning, looking over the side of my bath, I observed that the oilcloth on the bathroom floor had moved. Through a hole the size of a saucer I could spy Mrs. Richards, in the kitchen below, frying eggs and bacon.

It is hard to discover a restful sofa or armchair at the Consulate, for the furniture all goes back to a period which was neither comfortable nor artistic.

Passages are dark. The whole hotel is noisy, and I am not referring now to the tomcats that give battle at midnight in Main Street, or the calling of the mynah birds at dawn. Yet I liked the Consulate. George Moyce charged only four guineas a week, an incredible rate in November 1954, and that may have had something to do with it. But that was not the whole story. There was a pleasant atmosphere about the place, and I began to appreciate it on the first day, when I sat down to a good lunch of deep water jack, island lamb, roast potatoes, cabbage, peas and bananas.

I was served mainly by children. Marion, the shy, pretty, light skinned waitress, could not have been more than fourteen. Small boys made my bed and brought jugs of hot water to my room. Moyce looked after the bathroom geysers himself. I think he knew that the small boys would have blown up the hotel for him.

Often in the afternoon I would hear cheerful sounds in the courtyard. There would be a retired Indian Army officer bowling, one of the small boys of the hotel batting, and Mrs. Richards and Marion sitting on a bench outside the kitchen watching the game. Moyce was always too busy to take part. He had a small soda and lemonade factory and a photographic business opening off the courtyard. Farther down Main Street he had just taken a house and turned it into a billiard and ping-pong saloon. He owned two cars which were for hire. He had also bought a travelling cinema so that he could take the talkies to the far corners of the island. And he had the first shop in Jamestown, on the right after you have crossed the moat and passed through the old gateway.

I called on Moyce in his shop one day, out of curiosity, to see what he could offer. That was the only shop I ever visited where new-laid eggs were displayed on

the counter in a shining enamel chamber. Moyce was frying fish rissoles for the Saturday trade, when the country people come into town to do their shopping. You cannot go far in Jamestown without encountering fish in some form or other.

One shop in Jamestown I shall always remember is Mrs. George's pharmacy in Market Street. Her husband died in 1899, after only two years of marriage. "I had to carry on the business without any training, and the doctor helped me," said Mrs. George. "Every time I made up a prescription I went about it as carefully as though I was baking a cake, and I never poisoned anyone." Mrs. George, at eighty-six, was still sitting at a table in front of the old-fashioned, massive counter when I called. She stared at the huge bottles of green and red liquid which were there in her husband's day, and the dozens of drawers and bottles of old drugs, untouched for decades. I left her weighing out sixpence worth of boracic powder for a fisherman. She had courage.

Most historians, scientists and other authors of St. Helena literature pay little or no attention to the islanders. It is surprising to find that even the authors of standard works on St. Helena such as J. C. Melliss and Philip Gosse give little space to the people.

I came to regard the St. Helena people as one of the most fascinating of the small, isolated races I have encountered. People who know the island will agree with me, I think, when I say that these islanders form the most friendly and pleasant coloured race on earth.

When the less educated islanders are talking among themselves it is often impossible to follow a word of it. Through the centuries they have built up a fast-spoken English dialect more formidable than anything heard in the British Isles, and understood only by St. Helenans.

People landing on the island for the first time listen to this gibberish in wonder and ask: “What language do they talk here?” When they are informed that it is English, and that the islanders have never spoken any other language, they will not believe it.

Governor Harford spoke to me of the St. Helena people as “coloured English”. An earlier official described them as “English by race, environment and upbringing”. He added that they ranked as though born in England, and that English was the only language spoken on the island. I agree with the spirit of these assertions, but they are not entirely correct in detail.

Melliss, back in the ‘seventies of last century, wrote of the islanders as people of Portuguese, Dutch, English, Malay, East Indies and Chinese descent. He was a botanist rather than a historian. Neither the Portuguese nor the Dutch left anyone behind when they abandoned the island. All sorts of people, including Malagasy and Chinese, have gone into the island melting pot, but the predominant blend is British and Indian. Possibly a hundred of the present-day islanders have such light complexions that even in South Africa their European status would not be questioned. But the smiling island faces vary in colour from white to negroid blackness. There is an African strain which goes back to the slave days. Marriages between islanders and African slaves were rare, however, and the typical African darkness, woolly hair and negro features are uncommon.

Slavery came to St. Helena soon after 1659, when the English East India Company sent an expedition very much like Van Riebeeck’s enterprise of the same period. Ships of the English Company sailed to Madagascar for slaves, and every such vessel calling at St. Helena was obliged to leave one slave male or female as the Governor chose. Dr. John Fryer of Cambridge found four hundred

English men, women and children there when he called towards the end of the seventeenth century. Posters appeared on London hoardings urging people to settle in this island paradise; and among those who responded were some victims of the Great Fire of London. Shiploads of young women were recruited, and they were promised a free return passage to England "unless otherwise disposed of" after one year. But it was a long time before the settlers and their descendants became reconciled to island life. Dampier the buccaneer wrote: "Several of our men were head and ears in love with the Santa Hellena maids, who tho' they were born there, yet very earnestly desired to be released from that prison. The young women are but one remove from English, being the daughters of such. They are well shaped, proper and comely, were they in a dress to set them off."

West African negroes did not reach St. Helena in any numbers until 1840, when the Vice-Admiralty Court was set up for the trial of slavers. Three depots were established for "liberated Africans" as they were called. Employers on the island, farmers and merchants, engaged a number of ex-slaves of both sexes. Many liberated Africans went on to the West Indies where there was a labour shortage. Others became so fond of their St. Helena employers that they remained on the island. A number assumed the names of their masters, according to slave custom. You also find many typical slave names to this day; the Scipios and Catos of Longwood, the Caesars of Sandy Bay, an Augustus here and Mercury there. Pompey appears to have died out. Wellington, an ex-slave who lived until the end of last century, was a famous cook, and so tall that he was nicknamed Duke of Wellington. There was a Lord Nelson, too, and a Waterwitch who took the name of the ship which released him from slavery. Melliss said that by 1875

the ex-slaves formed one-sixth of the total population. Nevertheless, they did not mix with the islanders, and in three decades only six intermarriages were recorded.

There was an agricultural show soon after my arrival, and I saw the luscious island vegetables set out in booths made of wild ginger and bamboo. There, too, I listened to the dialect as the enthusiastic people went from one exhibit to another: School children had filled a stall with flowers and vegetables they had grown, and I was just able to follow one father who declared: “Don’t ferget the young people. This, the young people’s done it. I see they got it good and snug. They’re only young, see.”

Then there was the boy of about thirteen who remarked to his companions: “Us go look for bull bull.”

A schoolmaster from England told me that the island dialect is less grammatical than most dialects, with a limited vocabulary. Few people are unable to read and write nowadays, but the standard of literacy is low. Even on this small island, the districts have their own accents; Jamestown is different from Longwood, and Blue Hill from Sandy Bay. Islanders declare that each district has also produced its own physical types, and that they can tell at a glance where any person was born on the island. Certainly the hard-working country people are quiet and simple. They are credited with greater honesty than the townsfolk. I cannot see how this is possible, for no report of any form of theft committed during the month I was in Jamestown reached my ears.

Everyone notices the way St. Helena islanders use the Sam Weller accent transposing “V” and “W” like the Cockney from Dickens. “She vore a weil,” I heard one woman say. Possibly this peculiarity goes back all the way to the homeless Cockney settlers who went to St. Helena after the Great Fire of

London. There is also a touch of Devon in the mixed speech of this mixed race.

Two old women were quarrelling in a back street in Jamestown. One poured out abuse, the other listened and then had her say. “Is you done done? Vell, all what you says I is, you is.”

A resident who was born and educated in England and had spent sixty years in St. Helena told me that the islanders had become far more fluent and less shy during his years on the island. When he first arrived, he was conscious of being watched from behind doors and shutters. He could imagine them talking after he had passed. “Who dat? Who it is? What he say? What he done? “

Education has taken away most of the rawness. They have moved on, decade after decade, away from slavery. Most of the master and slave complex is vanishing, though many islanders still appear to be afraid to express an opinion. And they are so used to saying “sir” and “ma’am” that they use the term among themselves, in their own way. Often a girl will address an older woman as “sir”.

Occasionally they invent words, with amusing results. A newcomer entered into an agreement with an islander about some work to be done, and suggested putting it into writing. “All right,” said the islander, “only I’ll leave the wordification to you.”

One island phrase that will always linger in my mind is the rendering of “in the old days”. They all say: “In the before days.”

Among the poorest class, such as the fishermen, you can still hear the unadulterated St. Helena lingo. Here is an impression of a fisherman talking to a visitor on the wharf: “Dere was stunting say bout Govinmint ought to send for nets and men to sho how to ketch fish. Tcha! man, foolish … us can ketch fish better den orrer fellers. You know, sir, when us get gude luck and plentee fish and tinks

for once will get couple shillings dem wimmin in fish market stick up fer price. When peepil see plentee fish and price high they buy little tinking bum-bye cheap. Us poor fishmin get werry little."

A noteworthy achievement is the "shouting language" which the islanders have evolved to make their voices carry to the limit across the deep valleys. "Ahoy!" is the calling up sign. The system is found in a different form on Gomera in the Canaries, where the islanders whistle messages over the valleys.

St. Helena is an island of nicknames. This is inevitable where so many people bear the same surnames; but the island nicknames have a humour of their own. I met men called Conger-Kidneys, Fish-cakes, Candles, Bo'sun, Biffer and Bumper. Dollar Clark came to the hotel to cut my hair. Cheese Thomas is a member of a cricket team. Thomas is the surname most often encountered in St. Helena, and one member of the family remarked to me: "T'row a stone an' you hit a Thomas." There is a girl called Pumpkin and a man known as Blossom. When a husband gains a nickname, it is liable to be applied to all the rest of the family. Thus you find Jack o' Clubs Benjamin out for a walk with his wife Gertie Clubs and his son Cyril Clubs. I also remember a deaf mute, the best plumber on the island, known as Dumb Boy.

Belief in witchcraft and the "evil eye" survives in St. Helena as it does in remote English villages. Superstition is found in many shapes. Farm hands still peer into bowls of water in the hope that the faces of their enemies will be revealed.

The great Charles Darwin liked the islanders and their gentle ways, but deplored their diet of rice with a little salt meat. "The low wages tell heavily on the poor people," he remarked. Rice has become a luxury on St. Helena now, and the diet has changed to fish and potatoes,

bread and tea, with a variety of local dishes for special occasions.

St. Helena began parting sorrowfully with her sons soon after that evil day when the generous Honourable East India Company, which had ruled for nearly two centuries, handed over the island to the British Government. In the economy campaign which followed, old servants of the Company lost their incomes and the time came when former senior officers could be seen tilling the soil beside their old negro servants to keep body and soul together. As far back as 1838 the first body of islanders emigrated to the Cape. Hundreds followed from time to time until a few years ago, when the Union Government refused to admit any more islanders.

In the whaling days many islanders shipped as seamen in the American "spauters". Some found new homes in New Bedford and other whaling ports, and became prosperous American business men. The legacies they left to poor relations in St. Helena were greatly appreciated. More recently some young men and hundreds of girls have settled in Britain. The men seem to be drawn back to the island more often than the women.

I was told that no coloured islander had ever gained a university degree. Through sheer lack of opportunity, no St. Helenan has become a doctor. In business the honest islanders are seen at their best. All over the island you find little grocery shops, stocked with South African tinned fish and English biscuits and jams. Not long ago an old grocer died intestate. They were searching his tiny shop for a will when they discovered fifteen thousand golden sovereigns. This island keeps its secrets.

St. Helena has its old families with remarkable histories, but there are very few survivors of the seventeenth century settlers. You find the old names on the map, of course; Francis Plain where all

the islanders meet for sport and agricultural shows; Lufkin's Towers, now the official home of the island's surgeon; Billy Birch precipice where the old settler of that name was killed; Chubb's Spring which supplies Jamestown; Seale's Flat, Hunt's Gutt and Cason's Gate. I believe there is still a Bagley, however, descendant of the Orlando Bagley who, in 1694 was foreman of the jury which tried the black slaves who had conspired to kill all the white people on the island.

Fortunes have been made by St. Helena islanders, men who had never seen the world beyond their own cliffs. Perhaps the Thorpe family is the most astounding example of business ability flourishing on a lonely island.

The original Thorpe appears to have been a Yorkshireman who arrived in St. Helena about the middle of last century as a private soldier and married an island woman of Indian or Malay descent. The old soldier died a poor man, but his son William amassed a large fortune. He had ten sons and two daughters. Four sons still live in St. Helena, but not one of them could tell me how their father took the first step towards wealth. This is a gap with which I am perfectly familiar, for it occurs in the lives of most wealthy men. No one knows how they made the first thousand pounds. Yet I can hazard a guess.

Down on the Jamestown waterfront, when William Thorpe was a young man, they were breaking up old wooden slave ships which had been captured by the Royal Navy. These ships were sheathed in copper plates, and a great deal of this scrap metal came into Thorpe's possession. William Thorpe next bought up two sailing ships which arrived at St. Helena in distress. Thus he secured the ship for a few hundred pound instead of many thousands.

One of them was the French barque Meridian. She was patched and sent to

Ascension Island to load guano. There is a little rock called Boatswain Bird Islet at Ascension, and this was covered with thousands of tons of guano. Thorpe had seventy men at work for months scraping off this valuable deposit. Then the Meridian sailed on to London where ship and cargo were sold. Guano was fetching twelve pounds a ton at that time. The other ship, Royal Harry, had been condemned; yet when Thorpe sent her off to the West Indies to load coconuts she hardly made an inch of water all the way. She, too, was sold at a high price. Meanwhile a dispute which had arisen between Thorpe and the British Admiralty over the guano concession was settled with an award to Thorpe of sixty thousand pounds.

Thorpe sent two of his sons to sea before the mast. He preferred to spend most of his own life in St. Helena, where all his ventures turned to gold. Once he financed a tramway scheme in Japan, however, and made a huge profit. He also fitted out the schooner Alert to trade with ships which would otherwise have passed St. Helena without buying anything. Thorpe's schooner carried fresh meat, vegetables and eggs; and the ships he intercepted often broached their cargoes in their eagerness to secure such luxuries. Thus the schooner returned with bags of Australian grain and other cargoes worth many times the value of the fresh provisions.

William Thorpe's long life ended in tragedy about a quarter of a century ago. He had quarrelled with one of his sons, and he was walking home in a blind rage when he fell over a cliff. His will contained peculiar clauses, and he insisted upon the wives of his sons spending half their time on St. Helena or losing certain portions of the huge estate. I was told that three of his sons inherited £140,000; and there is no taxation worth mentioning on the island.

The sons, I am bound to add, chose orthodox careers of unquestionable honesty. One who came off badly in the matter of his legacy introduced the first cinema into St. Helena. He now organises the parties of St. Helena girls who leave by every mail boat to go into domestic service in England. Lovely estates with fine old homes, in and out of Jamestown; are owned by surviving Thorpe brothers. One of them is a great traveller who has seen the world and is now spending his old age in his island home.

Napoleon once remarked that the only good thing about St. Helena was the coffee. It is admirable coffee; but I discovered a number of other good things which the unhappy Emperor must have enjoyed before his health failed. There ought to be a St. Helena cookery book by some exiled Mrs. Beeton, marooned on this fragrant crumb of earth and making the best of it magnificently. As no one seems to have said much about the food since Napoleon's day I will give you my impressions of this lonely island larder and the cuisine which put three pounds on my weight while I was there.

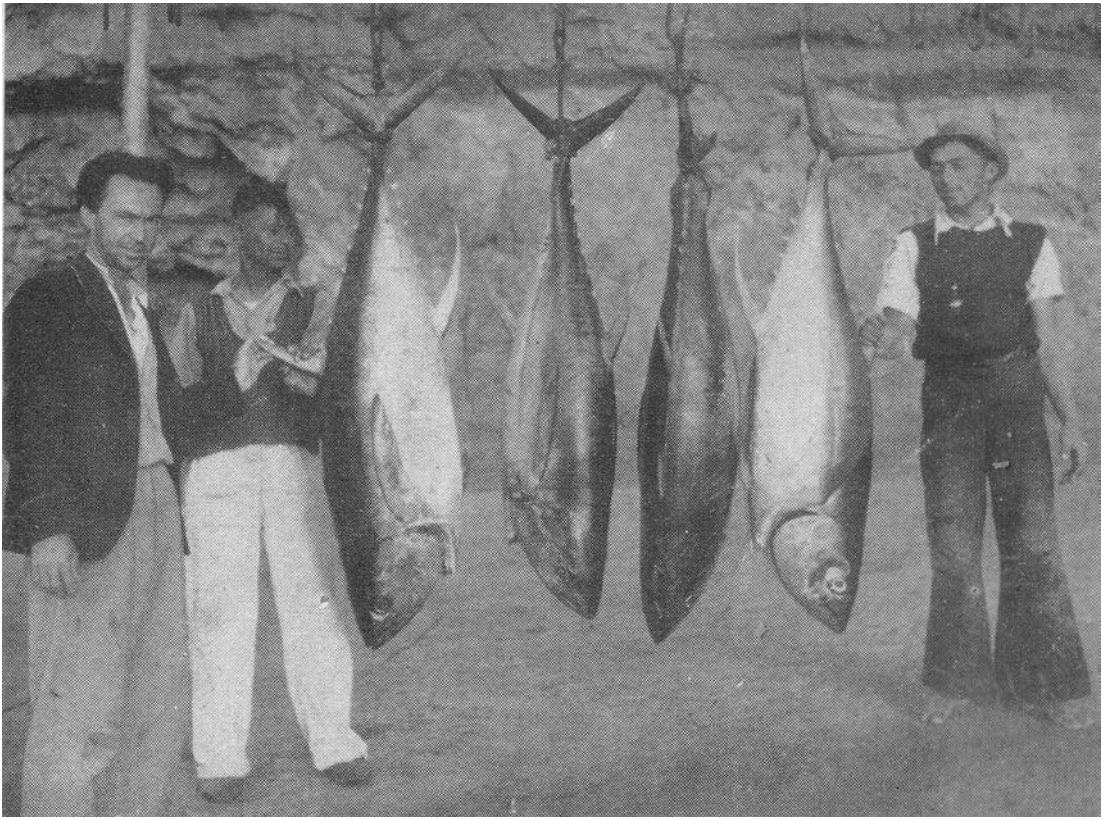
Van Linschoten the Dutchman, towards the end of the sixteenth century, wrote of the "great abundance of fish, a wonder wrought by God, for with crooked nails they may take as much fish as they will, and is of as good taste and savour as any fish that I ever ate, and this every man that hath been there affirmeth to be true."

Long ago some of the St. Helena fishermen lived with their wives and children like wild creatures in remote caves in the cliffs. Nowadays the professionals are all off-shore fishermen, using double-ended whale boats of the old Nantucket pattern or squaresterned gigs. Visiting experts have declared that St. Helena is an angler's paradise; for the great yellow-fin tunny run in these waters and a boat may bring in dozens in a day. Three crack South African anglers led by

General Charles Brink landed nearly eight tons of game fish with rod and line during twenty days fishing. You have to go three or four miles off-shore to the west of the island for tunny. The island fishermen catch them on twenty-one strand hemp lines; and these lines are coiled skilfully. No man moves when a tunny line is whipping out of the boat, for a foul line with a hooked tunny is capable of taking off a man's hand or foot. The record St. Helena tunny weighed four hundred pounds and was eight feet long.

I doubt whether Sir Hudson Lowe would have allowed Napoleon out in the boats, but many a grand fish must have been sent up to Longwood for the French chefs to prepare. Some say that the deep-water bull's-eye with its huge eyes like targets and crimson skin is the most delicate of the everyday island fish. I had it boiled, with egg sauce, and I shall never forget it. But there is a rare fish known as the coal fish, with dark skin and flesh. This is brought in only once or twice a year, and usually goes to Government House. Years ago a solitary fisherman named George Harry used to boast that he could bring in a coal fish any time anyone would pay the price. Unfortunately he died without revealing his marks, so that now there are few on the island who have tasted the rich, steamed flesh of the coal fish accompanied by Tartare sauce.

Tunny is common enough to become monotonous, but the islanders never tire of it. They call it albacore, and make a soup of it with onion, potato, parsley, thyme and chilli. ("Never leave the chilli out of a St. Helena dish," the island cooks tell you.) The most familiar method is a pot-roast, when great cuts of tunny are stuffed with parsley, breadcrumbs and egg. Served with a brown, tomato or onion gravy, the tunny cooked in this way tastes more like meat and is indeed called "St. Helena beef". Tunny liver fried in



Tunny is common enough to become monotonous, but the islanders never tire of it.

deep fat has nothing fishy about it and strongly resembles calves' liver.

"Albacore now – I calls that a good straight-eating fish," an islander said to me. He meant it was easy to avoid the bones. Island cooks also make "albacore balls" (tunny rissoles) by mincing the raw fish, adding herbs and bacon and mashed potatoes, and frying until golden. These rissoles are packed carefully in tins and sent to homesick St. Helenans in many parts of the world. Tunny are also preserved by dry-salting and smoking with the aid of oak leaves or fine sawdust. According to island superstition, however, your face will turn red and swell if you eat dried albacore which has been hung in the rays of the moon.

Wahoo, which appear to be exactly like the Florida wahoo, is another sporting fish caught in St. Helena waters. These slate blue fish, running up to one hundred and forty pounds, often leap clear of the water when hooked, rush away at speed and put up a tremendous fight. On the island the wahoo is always known as barracuda, a pardonable error as there is a strong superficial resemblance. Wahoo are cooked like tunny, but they are more expensive and are called "white man's fish" by the islanders.

Another good fish which the poor islanders seldom taste is the cavally, nicknamed "St. Helena salmon". Mrs. F. Oswell Jones, custodian of the Jamestown library and a noted cook, told me that cavally should be partly fried, then placed in a pot with onion, parsley, a sprig of thyme and chilli, almost covered with water and steamed. Butter is added before serving.

The common fish of St. Helena are mackerel and bonito. Mackerel are soused, and the cask helps many a poverty-stricken family through lean times. Bonito are so voracious that a fisherman can haul in a hundred in an hour at the Jamestown anchorage. They

are fried, or eaten as rissoles. Sun-dried bonito are useful in hard times.

Flying fish are often chased ashore by porpoises, but you will never see them on sale in the Jamestown market. It is a favourite island delicacy. Here is a recipe Mrs. Jones gave me. Fry herbs and potatoes and add a dessert spoon of curry powder. Cut the flying fish in thin strips, place it on the curry mixture in a saucepan, cover and steam. Add salt. Keep turning it over and chopping it with a spoon. This dish is known on the island as "flying fish chutney". Incidentally, the deep-seated love of curries, chillies, and all hot and highly-spiced foods reveals the eastern element in the St. Helena people.

By the way, those fires I noticed coming up to the island at night were lit not only to lure the fish inshore but also to enable the hungry fishermen to cook their meals. On flat rocks below the frightening precipices they make their driftwood fires and put their "plow pots" in the flames. "Plow" appears to be an island corruption of pilau, the oriental dish of rice with meat and spices. The pot is a twenty-eight pound margarine tin in which the fisherman cooks rice, potatoes, a little bacon or salt pork, curry powder and onions. Freshly-caught fish are cleaned and put on top to steam. "Fish plow" is the week-end fare of scores of St. Helenans.

One dish which I thoroughly enjoyed was curried octopus, always known on the island as "catfish". Then there was porpoise, harpooned by hand and carried up to the market by the rejoicing crew. The meat tasted very much like pork, while the liver, served with an onion gravy and bacon, made a choice meal indeed.

Every evening a few boats pull out of Jamestown anchorage and along the coast beyond Rupert's Bay in search of "stump" and "long legs", the two island species of crawfish. The bamboo traps, like lobster pots, are weighted with iron and baited

with tunny heads. Down they go in fifteen fathoms, with bamboo spars as markers. I cannot say that the "stump" is equal to a Maine lobster, but it seemed to me to be more tender than the Cape rock lobster. St. Helena cooks serve their "stumps" boiled, curried and creamed. Mrs. Moyce of the Consulate gave me a "stump" which had been minced, returned to its shell with a little butter and some flavourings, sprinkled with grated cheese and baked until brown. This, in my view, is the most satisfactory way of dealing with all members of the crawfish family.

Limpets are the only shellfish which are really plentiful at St. Helena. They are boiled, cut out of their shells, and fried with herbs or curried. Wideawakes' eggs are hard to come by nowadays, for although they are found on the bird rocks along the St. Helena coast, the government has stopped the collection of eggs. Consignments still reach St. Helena from the sister island of Ascension, where the wideawake *(sterna fuscata)* is more plentiful. I acquired the taste for seabirds' eggs long ago, when penguin eggs were cheap and plentiful in South Africa. Devotees of these delicacies never forget the subtle flavour. The prized wide-awake's eggs are best eaten boiled; ten minutes is just right. They often appeared in the cable company's mess at Ascension as savouries, with the red yolk mixed with cheese or anchovy.

One week-end while I was in St. Helena a fisherman caught an eighty-pound turtle with rod and line. He then scaled a precipice with the turtle on his back; and thus I was able to taste steaks of turtle, fried with onion and served with a rich sherry gravy. It was a little too rich for me. But the green turtle soup which simmered for two days in the huge tureen at the Consulate was the most delicious I had ever experienced. The island folk still talk about an eight hundred pound turtle landed there last century. Two British

regiments had turtle soup for three days, and the shell was used as a roof by a soldier who was building a small cottage for himself and his wife.

St. Helena has always been a vegetable garden and an orchard. Fernando Lopez, the mutilated Portuguese who was the island's first settler, planted basil, parsley, mint, spinach, fennel, anise and mustard-seed for the good of his scurvy stricken countrymen. Chinese pheasants, with white-ringed necks, were put down by the Portuguese, and are still providing good sport after four and a half centuries. Red-legged partridges were sent from the Persian Gulf and guinea-fowl from West Africa. Though the early settlers led Robinson Crusoe lives, they never went hungry. Fig, lemon, orange and pomegranate trees and date palms flourished.

Yams, imported from Madagascar, fed the slaves and pigs of the island for hundreds of years. St. Helena islanders call themselves "Yamstocks", after the vegetable which was once their staple diet. I had some difficulty in persuading the Consulate people to put yams on the menu; apparently it was like asking for winkles in the West End of London. Every small holder still grows yams for his own use, though the happy days when the American whalers called for yams are over. Yams are cooked on the farms before they are sent down to the Jamestown market on pack-donkeys and sold at a penny or two pence apiece. According to island custom, banana skins are pressed on the yams while they are boiling in the pot. The ultimate flavour is a blend of potato and artichoke. Islanders fry their boiled yams in oil or lard, and these thrifty people eat yam and egg far more often than bacon and eggs.

Among the many English contributions to St. Helena were wild deer, now extinct, and blackberries, which I had for breakfast often at the hotel. Blackberry

duff is a true island dish; the little dumplings are dropped into the boiling juice as the blackberries are being cooked. Bligh of the Bounty landed breadfruit and other plants from the Pacific islands at St. Helena. Early last century a visitor wrote: “On every farm there were grown oranges, limes, lemons, figs, grapes, guavas, bananas, peaches, pomegranates, melons, watermelons, pumpkins. There was one apple orchard yielding the owner £500 a year.”

Few islanders can afford meat except on Sundays, and then it may be a roast leg of goat. With luck, there may be some left over for a stew on Monday. Curry, as I have said, is the great island dish and for this the cheaper cuts of meat can be bought. Island cooks serving white households make an excellent devilled chicken, using curry powder, cayenne, many onions, wine and Worcester sauce. Rabbit is treated in the same way. You can shoot wild rabbits in many parts of the island, and some people breed rabbits for the table.

They have a way with Irish stew which may be peculiar to the island. Mrs. Moyce told me that she first boiled all the vegetables – whole onions, carrots and a little turnip. Mutton chops or cuts of beef are done separately in another pot. When the stew is served, the meat is placed in the centre with the vegetables round it.

Pigeons are eaten on St. Helena, but the wild doves, which are common, are left strictly alone. I was told that doves are supposed by the islanders to have some religious significance.

Many exhibits at the agricultural show I visited bore the Longwood label, for the land round Napoleon’s old domain is still a flourishing farm. I saw, too, some of the lesser-known island foods; the watercress that grows wild along the mountain streams, once famous among scurvy stricken sailor men. There was a purslane,

indigenous I believe, which is used as spinach; the wild raspberry, sold in the market for making jam and jellies; the angelica which grows high among the ferns on Diana's Peak, with an aromatic stem which tastes like fennel. I bought a jar of light yellow St. Helena honey at the show. Bees feed on the wild kaffir-thorn tree; others prefer aloes and cactus, and give a darker and thicker honey.

Deadwood Plain, beyond Longwood, produces some huge mushrooms in November, but the finest field mushrooms are picked round the former tomb of Napoleon in Sane Valley. Artichokes, guavas, Cape gooseberries, granadillas and several other vegetables and fruits grow wild on the island. Wild potatoes are rare; wild tomatoes and sweet chillies not so rare. There is a wild mint which is dried and used as a substitute for tea, or scattered in the cottages to destroy fleas.

St. Helena tea *(Beatsonia poytulacifolia)* is another wild growth found on the rocky cliffs and bearing a little white blossom. This is brewed green, or dried by the poor and mixed with imported tea. It has a reputation for restoring lost appetites. Islanders also collect a growth known as lemon grass and mix it with tea to impart a lemon flavour. Balm of Gilead is an island plant which is infused with boiling water and used to treat fevers.

Five banana varieties flourish in St. Helena, some growing wild in ravines. Naturally, this free food is not neglected by the island cooks. Bananas appear in milk puddings, and there is a dish for special occasions, known as "banana pride", in which the bananas are fried, sprinkled with sugar and finally soused with rum or brandy.

Pumpkin appears in many forms, and a familiar island dish is pumpkin pudding. Boil or steam a yellow pumpkin, add sugar while hot, then margarine, spice, squeeze of lemon, flour and eggs. Place this in a greased pan and bake for two or

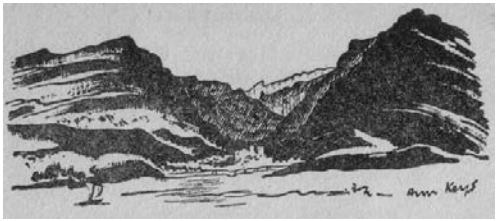
three hours. Pumpkin fritters are also baked in large slabs.

Cabbage is a popular vegetable in St. Helena, probably because the cooks understand the art of cooking it. When fish is scarce, the housewife buys a little salt pork and steams it with cabbage, potatoes and margarine.

Let us return to the coffee to end this St. Helena banquet. Coffee was first planted by Governor Pyke more than two centuries ago; and the island coffee won a first prize at the London Exhibition in the middle of last century. At that period, St. Helena coffee fetched a penny a pound more than any other coffee in the world on the London market.

Foolishly the islanders tore the coffee bushes out of their fields to make way for flax, the lazy man's crop. They lived to rue the day, and now a great deal of re-planting is in progress. You find the old coffee growing in hedges; the last of that pure Mocha coffee which has never known a pest. Kenya coffee is also being cultivated on government ground and elsewhere. Dry seasons appear to favour the coffee, for then crops are heavy. Down in the Sandy Bay area, in sheltered ravines, coffee grows wild, bushes with pure white blossoms and red berries reaching a height of fifteen feet.

One of these days you will hear more of St. Helena coffee. It is mild when taken alone, but lends itself naturally to a blend. Coffee may restore something of St. Helena's lost prosperity, and I hope that the smallholder, the hard-pressed countryman with his tiny cottage and yams and pack-donkeys, will share in that wealth.



Chapter 21
IN A TINY CITY

ST. HELENA HAS only one entrance and no exit," say the people who love the island and never wish to leave. Jamestown is the entrance, and it has been called a tiny, unique city' because it is at once the capital and only town of St. Helena." Jamestown is indeed unique. By sheer chance rather than a love of beauty it has preserved its past almost complete, so that you step into a Main Street which is a handsome relic of the eighteenth century. Two rows of dignified Georgian houses look into each other's sashed windows. On the small, square panes you can still read the names, scratched with diamonds, of residents who lived there long ago. Earlier this century you would have seen island children wearing three-cornered beaver hats and frilled linen collars. In some ways Jamestown is still early Victorian, and keen observers say that Main Street seems to have been lifted bodily from Tunbridge Wells.

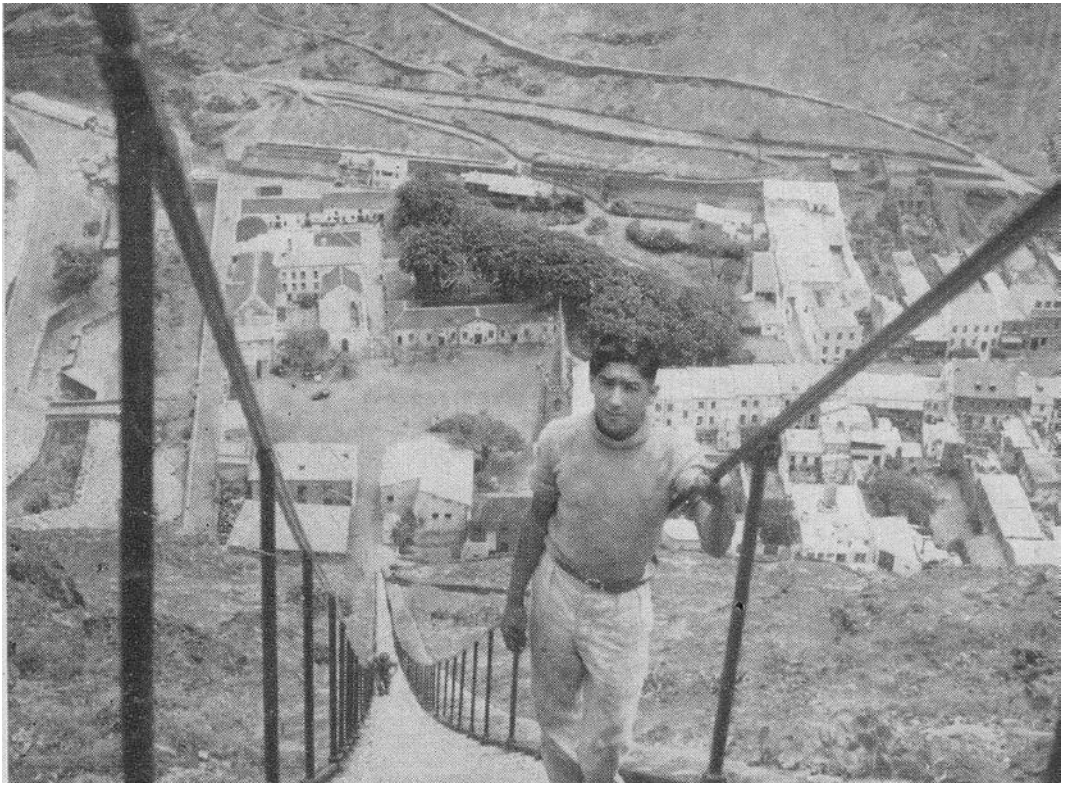
I made my own map of Jamestown, all the way from the Castle portcullis to the end of the valley. They play tennis in the Castle moat nowadays, and not many people notice the seven "post office stones" built into the wall. At the Castle entrance (a cameo for an artist with a glimpse of steps and trees and cobbled courtyard) you find the coat-of-arms of the English East India Company. Here, too, is the oldest English inscription on the island, the stone left by Will Fremlen, master of the ship Dolphin, who called in 1645 when the island was deserted. Go out on the Castle terrace and you can imagine a ghostly orchestra playing in the ballroom; the people of the island gazing

in wonder upon Madame Bertrand and the chic women of Napoleon's entourage.

Next to the Castle are the law courts and the library, while on the far side of the parade is the almost-empty gaol. But the sight that holds the gaze of every visitor is Jacob's Ladder, certainly one of the seven wonders of the island. Ladder Hill gained its name before the end of the seventeenth century, for there was a rope ladder at the steepest part, long before any road was made. The modern Jacob's ladder, with a so-called "tramway" on each side of the steps, was built by army engineers in 1830 to enable ammunition and stores to be raised from Jamestown to the fort above. Country produce went down the inclined plane in safety trucks which could not run away if the rope broke; an invention of the Jamestown organist. You can still see the concrete base where mules worked the capstan bars which set the whole contraption going.

Climb the steps by all means if your legs are in good condition, but remember that many who set out do not reach the top. There are seven hundred steps; each step is eleven inches high, a most tiring choice. (One step is buried at the foot, so the guide books tell you there are six hundred and ninety-nine steps.) The total length of the ladder is nine hundred and thirty-three feet, and the vertical height six hundred feet. That gives an average slope of thirty-nine degrees, steep enough to make some people dizzy. Islanders go up the ladder with a peculiar backward swing of the leg which helps them on the high steps and prevents aching muscles. School-children attending the secondary school on top think nothing of a climb which is an impossible ordeal for many people.

Rails on each side of Jacob's Ladder are of such width that the island boys are able to lie with their necks on one rail and feet on the other and slide down at a speed which horrifies the newcomer. This feat



Islanders go up the ladder with a peculiar backward swing of the leg which helps them on the high steps and prevents aching muscles.

was first performed when soldiers from the Ladder Hill barracks were on duty in Jamestown at lunch-time. Boys were sent down with rations, and they had to deliver the soup before it cooled off. They soon devised the method of sliding down the banisters with the canteens balanced on their stomachs. Hundreds of island boys can race up the steps and slide down within eight minutes. It takes nerve and skill, and it reminded me of the guides running up and down the Pyramids. I believe there has been only one death on Jacob's Ladder, and the ladder cannot be blamed for that. The victim was a naval seaman who unwisely attempted the descent after a visit to an inn.

The old signal station at the top of Jacob's Ladder is the home nowadays of a hospitable retired colonel. It has been transformed into a comfortable residence with one of the most remarkable views in the world; and very glad I was to stand there with a glass of pink gin in my hand and the cliffs of St. Helena framed in the long window. One night, I remember, a fleet of whalers bound for the Antarctic anchored off the island. They held no communication with the shore, but it was as though the world had come up over the horizon. The colonel's guests stared hard at those whalers; and the sun went down; and there was the "green flash", a rare and brilliant spectacle, shooting upwards from the setting sun. I remember, too, the position the colonel had chosen for his bed. It was level with the railing at the edge of the precipice on the seaward side. An uneasy sleeper would have rolled over, and then gone straight down to West Rocks. But the colonel is not disturbed by heights. He admits that sometimes he loses his morning tea-cup, but he declares that he will not lose his life.

Ladder Hill has other landmarks. Scars of the disused road to the summit cut by Governor Pyke in 1717 are still visible. The present road has a very necessary

stone wall. Emery's jump is the spot where Sergeant John Emery was thrown over the cliff when his horse took fright. Frenchman's Leap recalls a recent accident when the French Vice-Consul lost control of his car, drove through the wall and landed in the valley two hundred feet below – almost unhurt. A steel-topped motor-car is a wonderful thing.

Come back to Jamestown, slowly and carefully by the motor road. At the foot of Main Street are the public gardens, once a campground for Boer prisoners. The huge trees that loom over the parade from the gardens are peepul or banyan trees from India, planted all the way up the valley by Governor Dunbar more than two centuries ago. Above the gardens you may follow the steep, zig-zag hillside path called Sisters' Walk, laid out by Governor Patten for his two daughters early last century. This scene formed Napoleon's first glimpse of the St. Helena interior in daylight. He landed in the dark and lodged that first night in the boarding-house kept by the government botanist, Mr. Porteous. Sad to relate, this fine old house was sold in 1937 for two hundred pounds and pulled down to make way for a motor garage. By an almost incredible coincidence, the room selected for Napoleon, overlooking the gardens, was the very room which had been occupied ten years before by Sir Arthur Wellesley, later Duke of Wellington.

Not all monuments are to be admired, but there are a few in this part of Jamestown worthy of your full attention. One stands in the public gardens, built with the hard-earned pennies of the men of H.M.S. Waterwitch in memory of their shipmates who died while rounding up the slavers. Her captain was Sturdee, father of the admiral who gained a wider fame at the Falklands battle.

Sometimes a doctor becomes a legend, not only because of his medical skill but as a man. And such a man was Dr. W. J. J.

Arnold of St. Helena, whose monument stands in the middle of the parade ground. “The best friend St. Helena ever had,” reads the inscription. Arnold was an Irishman and a bachelor. He arrived in St. Helena as an army surgeon in 1901, and became a general practitioner when he left the service. Later he was appointed Colonial Surgeon, and he acted as Governor in 1925, shortly before his death. Dr. Arnold not only gave his skill to the island, but also every penny he could spare. The poor worshipped him. He rode about on horseback attending the very poor without ever charging a fee, and when a patient could not pay for medicines he provided the money out of his own pocket. “He knew the heart of every poor person on St. Helena,” an old boatman told me. I mentioned the name of Dr. Arnold to an island woman and tears came into her eyes as she said: “I tell you, a shiver went through this place the day the doctor died.”

St. Helena’s most famous dynasty is the Solomon family, and I found a memorial tablet to Saul Solomon (1817-1892) in St. James’s Church at the foot of Main Street in Jamestown. The first of the line to settle on the island, also Saul, was put on shore gravely ill from a ship bound for India ten years before the end of the eighteenth century. He recovered and became known in time as the “Merchant King of St. Helena”. The first Saul Solomon persuaded his brothers Benjamin and Joseph to leave London and join him in business on the island. There was also a Charles Solomon in those days, probably another brother. Originally the family was Jewish. Church registers as far back as 1798 record marriages and baptisms of members of the family. The Saul Solomon who came to South Africa, founded the “Cape Argus”, and made such a great name for himself in Cape politics, was Joseph’s son, born on the island. It is interesting to note that the Solomons had

a printing press on the island early last century.

Saul Solomon the first was an admirer of Napoleon. According to island legend, Saul sent a silken ladder, hidden in a teapot, to Longwood, the idea being that Napoleon would descend a cliff at night and escape by boat; however, the plot was discovered and the ladder seized. Historians have been unable to confirm the story. The Solomons supplied Longwood with provisions, of course, and some of the local halfpenny coins bearing the names of Solomon and his partners Dickson and Taylor were dug up at Longwood during my visit. Saul Solomon was Consul for France at the time of the removal of Napoleon's body. He made the arrangements for the exhumation and received a medal. Miss Gideon, a relative, made the French flags used on this occasion and the Prince de Joinville presented her with a gold armlet set with rubies, pearls and an emerald. The last of the line is the Hon. H. W. Solomon, O.B.E. He has no children, and he has sold most of his St. Helena interests to a London firm. Thus the Solomon dynasty is coming to an end after more than a century and a half.

Though several Jewish names remain on the island, the little Jewish colony which formed round the first Saul Solomon has died out. A name which seems to have vanished is Gideon. The first Gideon appears to have been Lewis Gideon Solomon, a brother of the first Saul Solomon, who dropped the Solomon by deed poll to avoid confusion with the other Solomons. Lewis Gideon was a partner in the firm of Solomon, Gideon and Moss; he was also a jeweller and watchmaker, and Napoleon entrusted him with the repair of the Lengwood timepieces. Gideon was very friendly with Napoleon's physician 0'Meara and supplied him with newspapers. All these Jews of St. Helena have gone, both in the

religious and the racial sense, as a result of conversion and intermarriage with Gentiles. Islands are always worth studying. It seems that a small human minority on a remote island is bound to be swallowed up.

Main Street is full of memories of personalities. Next to the Porteous house stood the queer old American Consulate, one room upstairs, one room downstairs. It has gone, but the last consul, Captain Coffin, has not been forgotten. Apart from these two demolitions, I think Main Street is intact. Almost every stately house is a home, with a barred cellar below where the slaves once lived. Several houses have steps and high stoeps reminiscent of the Old Cape Town architecture. The cobbled pavements and gutters must be very old. Some of the buildings have iron frames for oil lamps. Street lighting came towards the end of Queen Victoria's time; before that you could put your own lamp in a frame and light up. It is one of the quietest streets I have ever known, and often the only sound is the trade wind rustling the dry banana leaves. Woolsmoke and the gratifying odour of fresh bread from the Benjamins' bakery are the aromas. And the sight which a purely St. Helenan is a cavalcade of donkeys coming in from the country loaded with firewood and vegetables, poultry and fruit.

The most unusual sight in Main Street, of course, is a stranger. I walked down to the wharf before breakfast on my first morning in Jamestown; passing the gardens I became aware of a man who had been sweeping the street. When he saw me he stood rigid, gaping and gripping his broom; and he stared after me, thunder-struck, until I had disappeared through the portcullis. As I have said, someone called Jamestown a "tiny city". It is really just one of the world's many small towns, but an isolated small town, a small town at the end of the world. If you decide to lead any

sort of double life, do not settle in Jamestown.

I am still lingering in Main Street. There are a couple of cafes where the white exiles take their morning coffee and egg sandwiches when they come into Jamestown for their Saturday shopping. Here, too, is the town house which the last of the Solomons sold not long ago; a grand old mansion where Madame Patti once gave a concert. I have already spoken of my hotel, the Consulate, but there are many stories, and much history, enshrined in those bricks. In the whaling days, and I am talking now of the American sailing whalers, some of the skippers' wives put up at the Consulate and waited for their husbands to return from the Southern Ocean. Late one night a captain's wife awoke with a thirst, complained of illness and loudly demanded a drink. Mrs. Knipe, the proprietor's wife, brought her a brandy and water. It was too weak for the American palate. Everyone in the hotel heard the captain's wife shouting: "This is what I call water bewitched and brandy begrudged."

Next door to the Consulate is the picturesque old Malabar store. Malabar was a ship. She was condemned and broken up, but her cargo was salved and placed in this store. (Another store on the parade ground is called the Rickmers for the same reason; the ship was the Willi Rickmers.) Solomon owned the Malabar, and his old office, which has handled practically all the wealth of this little island for so many years, is a little way down the street. St. Helena has no bank, but I cashed my traveller's cheques at Solomon's office. It is hard to imagine St. Helena without a Solomon.

Main Street forks out just beyond the Malabar store. At the top, facing the sea, is an old house nicknamed "The Canister" because it is shaped like an old-fashioned canister of tea. Slaves were sold by

auction under the trees outside "The Canister" early last century. They lit an inch of candle, and the bid made as the candle snuffed out was accepted.

Walk down Main Street on the left (facing the sea) and you come to the shops; the fragrant bakery, a grocer, and "The Star" general store owned by the Solomon firm. They put up their Christmas decorations while I was there and filled the windows with toys. No toy cost more than a few shillings; it was a pathetic illustration of the island's distress.

Now you are facing the post-office, a feverish place when a passenger ship comes in, for St. Helena stamps are in great demand. Over the post office during my visit lived a brave old artist, Mr. F. Oswell-Jones, a man with a beret, a white beard and the ribbons of three wars. He told me that he had started as a chorister and sung in the Westminster Abbey choir; he had been a theatrical painter, art director in the early days of British films, and a church decorator. "I've never had a regular steady job all my life," remarked Oswell-Jones uncomplainingly.

One day Oswell-Jones was orderly officer at Kasr-el-Nil barracks in Cairo. An officer, hatless, wearing carpet slippers, and without a belt, was brought in by the military police. They thought he was an impostor. He was Lawrence of Arabia. Not long afterwards Oswell-Jones was sent to Jeddah with a quarter of a million golden sovereigns, and he met Lawrence again. The money was used to finance the Arab revolt.

If I have wandered away from Main Street, I have shown you that all sorts of characters settle in St. Helena. Oswell-Jones married an educated St. Helena woman, the librarian who helped me to appreciate the island cuisine. "I shall never go back," said Oswell-Jones.

St. Helena's senior settler from England at the time of my visit was Mr. E. J. ("Pop")

Warren, for many years the island's chemist. He still looks into his shop occasionally, next door but one to the post office. "Pop" Warren and his wife entertained me again and again in their home on the Half Tree Hollow road, overlooking a great expanse of ocean. I shall remember "Pop" Warren (eighty-one when I met him) as a man who had spent his life in a small community on a lonely island without acquiring a narrow outlook. He could have held his own, with his sense of humour and technical skill, in London or New York.

Warren's sister had married a dentist and chemist who had established himself on St. Helena. Warren joined his brother-in-law on the island in 1889 as an apprentice. He has a fine collection of photographs covering the island's story since then, with a few historic pictures taken before his arrival. Some of "Pop" Warren's furniture is historic, too, and he believes that he has the posters from Napoleon's bed. Long ago he paid five shillings for a mahogany desk, made by a fine craftsman. At the back of a drawer he discovered a letter written by a seventeenth-century governor, Anthony Beale, warning his son against wine and women.

"Pop" Warren told me that he had never made more than five hundred pounds a year during his long period as a chemist. Yet he had brought up a son (farming in Devon) and two daughters (married to cable men) and had lived well all the time. A newcomer to St. Helena once asked Warren: "How much would I need to live on here? "

"I don't know," replied Warren. "I'd have to watch your habits closely for six months before I could answer a question like that."

St. Helena has a high illegitimacy rate owing to poverty. A bygone bishop told Warren that the island was the most

immoral place in the world. “I disagree entirely,” Warren retorted. “You ought to have a look at Marseilles and Buenos Aires before you talk like that. Thanks to the army, the navy and the merchant service there are a great many fatherless children on the island – but look how healthy they are! Without that new blood, they would all be lunatics through inbreeding by now.”

Pass on from “Pop” Warren’s shop to Wellington House with the high steps, the grey home of St. Helena handicrafts where ships’ passengers (the few that call nowadays) buy lace and beads and polished wooden trays with the St. Helena crest inlaid. Wellington, as Sir Arthur Wellesley, moved across the road to this house in 1805 after spending the night I have mentioned in the Porteous boarding-house.

Long before there was a Main Street, a century and a half before Van Riebeeck built the Cape settlement, Portuguese mariners lived in this island valley. The last houses in Main Street are owned by the government and occupied by Mr. Le Breton, a headmaster, Mr. Bizarre, the harbourmaster, and certain government offices. On the site of those houses the Portuguese assembled the timber of a wrecked carrack in the shape of a chapel. They called their settlement Chapel Valley, the name it bears to this day.

When Napoleon rode up Main Street on the first day of his island exile, he turned to the left at “The Canister” and passed through a street known ever since that day as Napoleon Street. Some of the double-storied houses and little cottages in Napoleon Street are very old, with ships’ timbers in their ceilings and stairways. In the shipping days, the great days of sail when a thousand, fourteen hundred ships anchored off Jamestown every year, there were sailors’ boarding-houses in Napoleon Street. The girls persuaded the men to desert, and they went to live

riotously at Bobbins' and other such establishments until their money was spent and the keeper cashed their advance notes and shipped them away.

Turn right at "The Canister" and you come to a policeman on traffic duty (the lightest of tasks), the general market and fish market, and the winding, uphill Market Street. St. Helena has no postal service within the island, but it has a free and pleasant alternative. Hand your letters to the policeman outside the market, and he will pass it on to the first driver going in the required direction.

It was in Market Street that I was shown a little English motorcar bearing the number "I" and a sale card marked £70. This was an historic car, the first that ever ran on the island (in 1929) and still in running order. I do feel that this island away from our mad world might have been left as the last home of the horse and the carriage. Motor-cars had been prohibited in 1919, and when the matter came up for discussion again nine years later, there were many who supported the ban. "Time is rarely the essence of any undertaking in St. Helena," wrote the Governor in his report on the subject. One escapist, who had settled on the island to avoid progress, declared that he would leave when the first car arrived. Nevertheless, the old ordinance was repealed, Mr. H. W. Solomon imported the car which I saw, and the escapist also soon became a car-owner. I have a St. Helena driving licence myself; but I still wish that I had known this island in the even more leisurely days of the horse.

Market Street has a friendly little tavern called the "White Horse", and not far away is the "Black Horse" building where slaves were sold. Mr. Edward Constantine, schoolmaster and authority on island history, took me to an old Market Street building occupied by the Mechanics and Friendly Benefit Society. (These old-established societies play a

large part in St. Helena life, for the poor islanders have learnt to help themselves and save for their hour of need.) Mr. Constantine was president of this society. He opened a black treasure chest – identified by British Museum authorities as sixteenth century workmanship – and showed me the false keyhole in front and the hidden keyhole on top. No doubt the chest had come from a ship. At one time the society's money was kept in the chest, and even now a member who receives aid is said to have "gone on the box". The society also possesses rosewood chairs of the Queen Anne period and round horn candle lanterns which came from sailing ships long ago. "This is a wonderful place for discovering antique furniture," pointed out Mr. Constantine. "Many a fish is cut up on a genuine Chippendale table. "

In a Market Street shop the owner showed me a box of coins and made me wonder whether there might not be prizes for the coin collector on the island. St. Helena uses British and South African currency at the present time; but in the past the money that circulated there was bewildering. Spanish dollars, also known as pieces of eight, were in general use in the seventeenth century. Later on, with ships of many European nations trading with the East and calling at the island, a great variety of coins were introduced. It was the place where passengers got rid of odd money, and eagerly the Jamestown shop-keepers accepted it. Thus in the eighteenth century the islanders found themselves juggling with seventeen different currencies at once. Gold doubloons were handled, and Bengal mohurs, moidores, star pagodas, gold gubbers and Venetian sequins. Madras rupees clinked into the tills with duca'oons, German crowns, Maria Therese dollars, Portuguese joes, Dutch guilders, rixdollars, francs and English shillings. Early last century, in spite of this dazzling and jingling array, there was a shortage of small change. Saul

Solomon stepped into the breach by having his own firm's halfpennies minted in London and sent to the island. More than seventy thousand were issued, but they are now rare.

If you follow Market Street up the valley you come to China Lane, where many of the Chinese labourers once lived. They arrived in Governor Beaton's time, early last century, not as slaves but as indentured farm labourers at a shilling a day and rations. Sometimes the Macao men fought the Cantonese; but they all worked well, and at one time there were more than six hundred of them on the island. They had their own joss-house in the Plantation grounds. Not one pure Chinese is to be found in St. Helena today, but the Chinese eyes and high cheek bones may be seen distinctly in some island families.

There are several romantic old residences with gardens at the upper end of the Jamestown valley. One of them is Cambrian House, where I was entertained by Miss Pritchard, descendant of an old family which became famous both on St. Helena and South Africa. (Colonel H. H. Pritchard helped to guard Napoleon. One of his grandsons was the Johannesburg surveyor after whom Pritchard Street was named.) Cambrian House has a garden, one acre in area, which is a fragment of the celebrated garden which once supplied the English East India Company's ships. Miss Pritchard still has her own mangoes and paw-paws, bananas, figs, lequats, guavas, avocado pears and rose apples. All the tropical fruits in St. Helena are grown near sea level. I saw bread fruit and Brazilian cherries in Miss Pritchard's garden, date and coconut palms, pink and white oleanders, jacaranda in flower, bougainvillea of two varieties.

Last house in the valley, above Miss Pritchard's, is Maldivia House. This was the site of the island hospital two centuries ago, and it is now the official

residence of the assistant medical officer. Maldivia recalls the voyage of the ship Drake in 1734, when she was homeward bound across the Indian Ocean. Far from land she picked up a canoe with ten natives of the Maldive Islands, almost dead from thirst. Three died after the rescue. Five men, one woman and a boy were landed at St. Helena and put to work as slaves in the garden which is named after their home.

Dinizulu, chief of the Zulus, spent part of his St. Helena exile at Maldivia. He felt the cold in the country severely, but the valley suited him and the other Zulus with him. I liked Maldivia House, with its small windows of hand-blown glass. But with the white ant in the woodwork, I give it another decade and then the historic mansion will fall to pieces as so many island homes have done. The largest mango tree in St. Helena grows in the garden.

All the gardens of this valley are watered by the stream known as “The Run”, which is the water from the Heart-shaped Waterfall above Maldivia. Floods were a menace, even in fairly recent years. No escape was possible in the old days when a wall of water rushed down a narrow valley, such as the Jamestown valley, after a cloudburst. Forts and plantations were damaged, the yam crops in Maldivia Gardens were covered with stones, houses and cellars were invaded by torrents. The heaviest flood in recent years occurred in 1878, when houses and stores in Jamestown were ruined, bridges were destroyed, and the streets were blocked for days with trees brought down by the sudden rush of water. Two lives were lost. When you cross the old moat and pass through the portcullis on to the Jamestown lower parade, turn to your left and you will find an inscribed stone showing the height to which the flood waters rose

before they burst through the gateway to the sea.

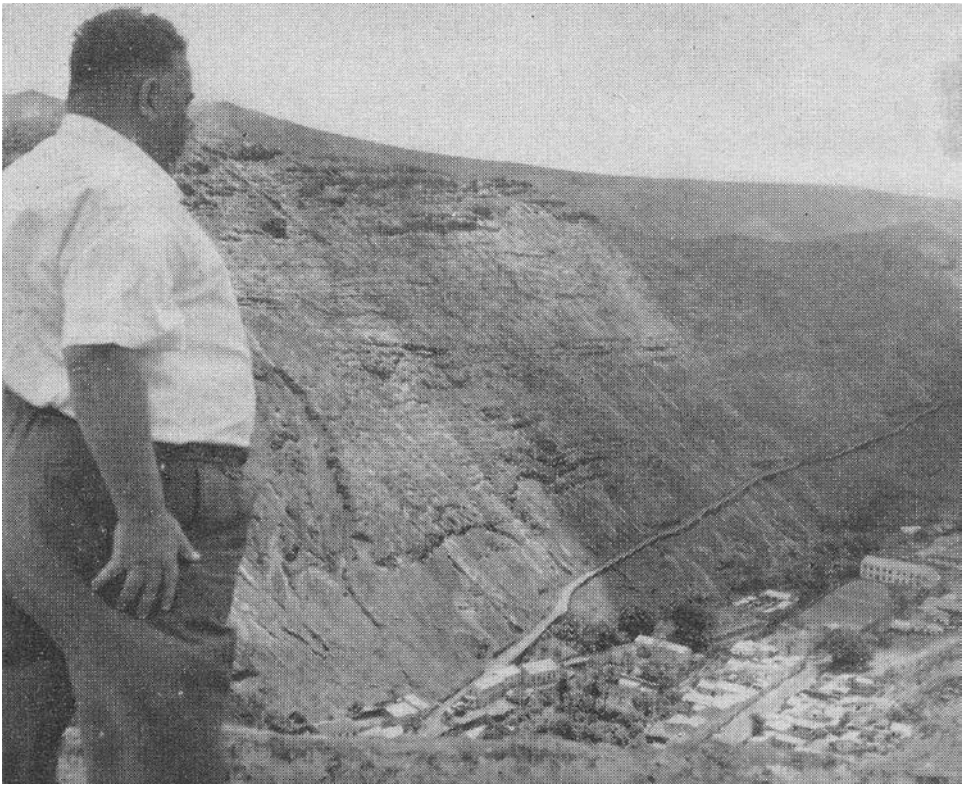
I was driving a tiny, borrowed car up the zig-zag Ladder Hill road one day when I saw a memorial tablet in the rock. It gave the names of nine people who were killed on April 17, 1890, when fifteen hundred tons of rock fell from that spot into Jamestown.

Wherever I went on St. Helena I was conscious of the heights. Jamestown is especially aware of its cliffs. All through the island history you find fatal accidents caused by people falling over cliffs, or landslides crushing people to death. Heavy rains or great heat affect the treacherous volcanic rock, the basalt and loose shale in all the steep parts of the island. The disaster of 1890 was the most serious rock fall ever recorded; but the tragedy may occur again with even greater loss of life. It is like living below a volcano.

Victims of the 1890 rock fall included a baby of one and a man of sixty. Twelve were injured, fourteen houses were wrecked and large portions of the road were carried away. I looked down from the road and saw the very boulders which had caused all this destruction.

High Rock, they call the place on the heights where the rock broke away, but the old name was Pierie's Revenge. Colonel Pierie, an engineer employed by the English East India Company, was so afraid of the place that he always rode past the overhanging rock at the gallop. He died in bed after all, but there was a rock fall at the spot in 1824, and then it was given Pierie's name.

I prefer eye-witness stories to historical records, and I had no difficulty in finding old people who remembered the 1890 disaster. "Everyone was in bed," Mr. Warren told me. "The rock tore down with a deafening roar at two o'clock in the morning, and with a sulphurous odour



Jamestown is especially aware of its cliffs. All through the island history you find accidents falling over cliffs, or landslides crushing people to death.

which made it seem as though Hell had opened. The night was so dark you could not cut it with a knife. It was ghastly. The whole town was panic-stricken, but no one knew where to run for safety."

Most of the victims were crushed to death in bed. There were many freak effects and marvellous escapes. Two large rocks passed tight through Mrs. McLaughlin's house, but no one received more than a few bruises. A twenty-five ton rock fell into the yard of Miss Bagley's house, pierced the bedroom and pinned Miss Bagley between the bed and the wardrobe. She and many others were rescued by seamen from H.M.S. Archer, which was anchored off Jamestown that night. The seamen came on shore with tackles and bars, picks and shovels, and they dug out the injured and the dead by lantern-light. They also showed their sympathy by starting a relief fund; every man in the ship's company from the captain downwards gave one day's pay.

Some islanders lived in caves at that time. It was forbidden many years ago; but in 1890 a family had a cave in the cliff a little way below the area where the rock broke away. The rockslide passed right over the mouth of the cave without injuring the people inside.

St. Helena is not as careful of its monuments as it might be. A lovely fountain (which some of you will remember) once stood outside the post office in Main Street in memory of the dead. It was provided as a thanksgiving by those who escaped the 1890 rock fall. Now it has made way for less decorative electric standards and motor-cars.

On May 5, 1921, exactly a century after Napoleon's death, the battery on Ladder Hill fired minute guns in honour of the centenary. They fired fifty rounds that day, and another fifty rounds next day. Four days later the whole cliff on the seaward side of Ladder Hill slid gently down on to the rocks at sea level. No one

was hurt on that occasion, but it was a reminder of the insecurity of many parts of Napoleon's isle. Geologists have estimated that the island has lost about one-third of its bulk since first it rose above the ocean. It will lose more. St. Helena is no place for letting off cannon.

St. Helena has been a true Robinson Crusoe island on more than one occasion. Juan de Nova Castella, the Portuguese who discovered the island in 1501, left behind a number of goats, asses and pigs. (A pity about the goats.) Fifteen years later the island received its first settler. He was a Portuguese nobleman named Fernando Lopez, and he had been mutilated in Goa for desertion and treachery. His right hand, the thumb of his left hand, his ears and his nose had been cut off, but he had survived this torture and stowed away in a ship bound for Lisbon.

The ship called at St. Helena for water. By this time Lopez had decided that he could not face his wife in his maimed condition, so he hid in the woods until the ship had left. Fortunately his shipmates had taken pity on him, and had left a barrel of biscuit, preserved beef, dried fish, salt and old clothes. They had lit a fire, which Lopez kept burning. In a farewell letter they advised Lopez to signal to any ship that called and ask for anything he needed.

One of the old Portuguese historians, Correa, put together a vivid and detailed account of the adventure of Lopez. It seems that the maimed exile was not altogether unhappy, for there was no one to look upon him with disgust or pity. At that time the island was covered with forest. Turtle crawled up on the beaches. Now and again he was able to kill one of the goats or pigs that were running wild. He gathered "many tender herbs which were savoury to eat". Fish were easily

caught. After a time he discovered stones which gave out sparks, and he no longer bothered to keep the original fire going all the time. His home was in a cave which he had scooped out with his four fingers in Chapel Valley.

A year went by, and then a Portuguese ship anchored off the valley. Fernando Lopez feared that he would be carried back to India and imprisoned, and he fled into the deep forests for sanctuary. From a cliff he watched the departure of the ship. When he reached his cave he found a store of biscuits, cheeses from Portugal, rice and other foodstuffs and a letter "bidding him not hide himself, but when any ship should touch there he should speak with it, for no one would harm him". Here was good news indeed for the hermit. And down on the beach he found a half drowned cock, which became his pet.

Nevertheless, Lopez had ceased to trust the human race, and for ten long years he took to the forests whenever a sail came round the cliffs of the valley. Hundreds of Portuguese seamen visited his cave. In the end King John III of Portugal heard the story of the St. Helena hermit and sent him a letter offering a free pardon and safe conduct to Lisbon if he cared to return.

Lopez was still hesitating when a "Man Friday" arrived on the island in the shape of a Javanese slave boy who had deserted from a ship. They did not get on well together. When the next ship called, the Javanese offered to lead a party to the hiding-place of Lopez in the woods. In this way Lopez was rounded up at last; but the Portuguese captain did not hold him for long. He merely gave Lopez a written assurance that he would not be carried off to Portugal against his will; while Lopez promised that he would never again hide in the woods when ships arrived.

There came a time when Lopez made the great decision to join a ship bound for Lisbon. Civilisation frightened him; yet he was received by his king and queen, travelled from Lisbon to Rome to confess his sins, and had an audience with the Pope. During this audience the Pope asked Lopez what his greatest wish, in life might be. “I yearn to go back to the peace of St. Helena, but I fear the King of Portugal may refuse this request,” poor Lopez replied.

With the influence of the Pope, however; Lopez soon returned to the island. This time he took many comforts with him. “He would shew himself and converse with the people of ships, and all gave him things to plant and to sow,” Correa recorded. “Thus he cultivated a great many gourds, pomegranates and palm-trees, and kept ducks, hens, sows and she-goats with young, all of which increased largely, and all became wild in the woods.”

Lopez died in 1545, after living alone for nearly thirty years in the quiet valley where Jamestown now stands. He was a true lover of solitude, and the island enabled him to overcome a handicap which would otherwise have tormented him throughout his life.

The next Robinson Crusoes of St. Helena were slaves of both sexes, African and Javanese, who swam ashore from a Portuguese slaver. Such generous cover was provided by the old gum wood trees and other growths that it was impossible to trace a runaway. The slaves lived on the fruit and vegetable gardens planted by Lopez and the wild cattle and goats. It is not clear whether the 1ittle slave colony abandoned the island or died out; but a time came again when St. Helena was left to the animals, apart from periods when sick Portuguese seamen were put on shore to recover and join the next ship.

Pirates looked in occasionally. Then there was Bermudez, the Patriarch of

Abyssinia, a troublesome Portuguese who appears to have fallen out with the captain of his ship. Bermudez insisted upon being put on shore at St. Helena with his slaves, and he had to wait a year before another ship took him away. As far back as 1583, three Japanese ambassadors landed on the island. They were on their way to Rome, having been advised by some Jesuit missionaries to call on the Pope; a strange voyage considering the remoteness of Japan at that period and long afterwards.

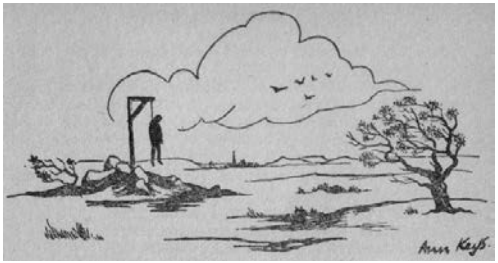
For nearly a century the Portuguese and their friends the Spanish managed to keep the very existence of St. Helena a deep secret. No ships but Portuguese had sighted the island. At last a Spanish galleon was looted and burnt by the English sea rover, Captain John Cavendish, who extracted the secret of St. Helena from the galleon's pilot. Cavendish found the island in 1588 and left an excellent account of his visit. The only inhabitants were slaves; but he inspected a tiled church in the valley and two houses. "This valley is the fairest and largest low plot in all the island, and it is marvellously sweet and pleasant, and planted in every place with fruit trees or with herbs," Cavendish wrote. "There are in this island thousands of goats, which are very wild: sometimes you may behold them going in a flock almost a mile long. We took and killed many of them for all their swiftness, for there be thousands of them upon the mountains."

Cavendish did not realise it at the time, but these goats were to become the curse of the island, horned devils eating crops and indigenous growths. Only in comparatively recent years has this pest come under a measure of control. However, the goats evidently kept out of the cultivated area during Cavendish's visit, for he described the valley as "so full of fruit trees and excellent plants that it seemed like a fair and well-cultivated garden, having long rows of lemon,

orange, citron, pomegranate, date and fig-trees, delighting the eye with blossoms, green and ripe fruit all at once".

Among the early Dutch callers was Van Linschoten, who described St. Helena as "an earthly Paradise for the Portuguese ships, and seemeth to have been miraculously discovered for the refreshing and service of the same". There came a time when the Portuguese hardly dared to anchor off the island they had colonised; for, as an observer of the period wrote: "the English and Dutch, in the churlish language of a cannon, sometimes disputed their property."

St. Helena was deserted when Van Riebeeck founded the Cape settlement. Thus he was able to send the galiot Tulp to the island in 1654 to meet the Dutch return fleet from the East and secure necessities such as rice, sugar and wheat. On later occasions the island itself supplied certain of Van Riebeeck's needs, for the ship Nachtglas brought him fruit trees from there. The famous Kakamas peach, a yellow cling variety, is actually a descendant of the peach which Van Riebeeck imported from the island. Then came the English occupation of St. Helena under Captain John Dutton in 1658, and the island ceased to be a no-man's-land.



Chapter 22
"EVERY MAN HAS HIS PRICE"

ST. HELENA IS a dot in the South Atlantic, but it has many claims to fame. Probably it is the only island in the world with a population running into thousands which can claim to have lived through more than a century with only one murder. Old islanders told me all about that murder, from every angle, and described the Governor's dilemma when the two murderers had to be executed. I heard queer tales of other crimes within living memory and the crimes of long ago. They traced for my benefit, in old St. Helena Almanacs, the career of a character named James Francis Homagee, a Parsee, who was given the choice of death for some unspecified crime in India or the hangman's job on the island. (In the middle of last century it was considered the right thing to go abroad for a hangman.) Homagee never had to carry out an execution. At first he walked round Jamestown with a tin on his head selling fish. Then he became messenger at the Castle. He secured a post as clerk and towards the end of last century he rose to be chief magistrate of the island. Homagee certainly made the right choice.

In a dark little room in the Castle I spent hours examining the St. Helena archives, including criminal records covering hundreds of years. This island has had its full share of cruelty and torture, mutinies and hangings. In a seventeenth century conspiracy thirteen men "in open day" shot Governor Johnson at the Castle and escaped in the ship Francis and Mary. Rebellious slaves were hung, drawn and

quartered, while some were “hanged in chains alive and starved to death”.

Records of the quarter sessions and other criminal trials which I studied, some trivial and others serious, bring to life many events which shook island society. Idle, gossiping women, scolds and tale-bearers, mischief-makers and scandal mongers were ducked in the sea or whipped. Erring slaves were branded, or burning sealing wax was dropped on their shuddering limbs. One slave who had poisoned several people was burnt to death, and all the blacks on the island had to bring fuel and watch the execution. Soldiers were flogged and drummed out of the garrison with halters round their necks. Thieving slaves had their right hands cut off.

One of the company’s officers, who had an illicit love affair with a widow, was called to task by the governor. He insulted the governor, whereupon he was degraded before the garrison, his sword was broken over his head, and he was forced to stand in the pillory with his paramour. Two centuries ago four white men who beat a woman slave to death were fined six pounds ten shillings between them. Often a black would be condemned to death while a white accomplice would receive a light sentence. Until late in the eighteenth century the evidence of a black was not admissible against white people. Elizabeth Renton, who murdered one of her female slaves with a carving knife, escaped for this reason.

Among the earliest entries I found in the Council records (1678) was a mention of an inquest on one Thomas Green. “Body taken up,” ran the record. “Trial by touching the dead body. Three persons committed on verdict of manslaughter.” At this period, too, W. Melling was ordered to ride the wooden horse with a bag of shot at each heel; his crime was “swearing and incivility”.

Soon afterwards Elizabeth Starling assaulted and abused the captain of the ship Charles the Second, while her husband threatened to beat the captain “and to make the sun shine through him”. Apparently the husband was acquitted, but Elizabeth received fifteen lashes on her naked body and was ducked three times.

Two runaway apprentices, Rowland and Eastings, broke into a house, took a fowling piece and killed a sow. Each lad had the tip of his right ear cut off, his forehead branded with the letter “R”, and a pair of pothooks riveted round his neck. They were also flogged round the town.

Then there was the impudent Corporal Bowyer who married a widow, Mrs. Simms, before the circumstances could be considered by the Governor in council. Bowyer was reduced to private and imprisoned, while ten acres and eight head of cattle belonging to Mrs. Simms were seized.

The court dealt with the apprentice Eastings again not long after the episode of the sow. He was only fourteen, but he had committed so many thefts that some members thought he should be hanged. Here is the final decisions: “Looking on him as a youth who may become a good man, it was ordered that he be whipped under the gallows and then sent away off the island in the ship Resolution.” It seems that the Resolution was selected because she was a dangerous, leaky vessel which was expected to founder during the voyage to England. However, the sentence was regarded by the directors of the English East India Company as far too lenient. “We are ashamed that our aged Governor should be guilty of so great a folly,” came the reprimand from London.

John Knipe complained to the island council that Bridget Coales had failed to marry him as promised. She sat on the lap of the butcher of the ship Modena and let him kiss her. Knipe asked her whether he

was not as good as the butcher, whereupon she called him “down look dog” and compared him with an old dog owned by her father. Bridget had to pay fifteen pounds damages.

According to the records, chaplains and doctors were among the most troublesome of the Company’s officials stationed on St. Helena during the eighteenth century. “Dr. Wignall always drunk and nearly killed the Governor by giving unsuitable medicines, his excuse being he had nothing else to give,” runs an entry in 1725. “The doctor, for drunken and disorderly conduct, placed in the stocks for one hour, and he sung and swore the whole time.”

Seven years later it was recorded that Mr. White the chaplain and his wife had for a long time “led very scandalous and immoral lives, the woman having been drunk almost every day she has been on the island, and Mr. White himself often in the same condition and always rude and troublesome.” For sixteen months Mr. White had neither dined nor supped with his wife. This conduct was “highly resented by all the good Dames of this place, and we believe, and the woman says, that this cold, unkind usage is the cause of her giving herself up to liquor and ill company.” It is not clear from the records how the Company dealt with White.

Totty, a slave, was tried for running away repeatedly and living a freebooter’s life. Members of the jury had suffered from Totty’s raids, and they petitioned the Governor to have Totty executed. This was granted. He was drawn on a cart by other runaway slaves to the place of execution and hanged.

Those were hard times for slaves. Moll, a slave woman owned by Mrs. Gurling, was sentenced to three hundred lashes (to be given in three instalments) and to be branded on her cheek for breaking into a country house and stealing one rupee. Yet

when George Alexander stripped his slave Abigail and beat her cruelly with a rawhide whip, he was fined forty shillings. Even in 1810 a free black named Nancy May was given two hundred lashes for stealing fowls. She was tied to a cart, wearing a paper bearing the words “Fowl Stealer”, and beaten in different parts of the town.

Ladder Hill above Jamestown was known in the earliest days of the English settlement as Fort Hill. For a century the gallows stood there. People on board ships in the harbour and everyone in Jamestown could see the bodies hanging in chains, according to the brutal custom, as a warning to others.

Sorcerers and witches were burnt to death. Lawyers were deported “lest the people should occupy their minds with litigation”. (To this day there is not a lawyer in private practice on the island.) There was also a strong prejudice against such decent folk as the Quakers. An entry in 1680 reads: “William Saddler is discovered to be a Quaker, for which and other bad behaviour he is ordered to leave the island.”

Ensign Slaughter, who was accused of slandering the Governor, was flogged. If you go through the records carefully to the date when the sentence was carried out, you will discover that the wretched officer was flogged with wire whips and fish hooks tied to a cane.

Men and women, white or black, were usually stripped when flogged. An unusual entry appears in 1733, when a planter named John Long was sentenced for receiving stolen yams from the Briars. The warrant reads: “You are to whip the said John Long publicly with ten lashes, but in regard he hath been a planter here, you may for this first time let him receive the shame of this punishment with his clothes on. You are to make your prisoner fast to the tail of the wooden horse, and read this to him before you whip him.”

Soldiers of the St. Helena garrison loved their taverns and punch-houses. When these places were put out of bounds towards the end of the eighteenth century, the troops mutinied. Led by a sergeant, they marched out of their barracks with bayonets fixed and drums beating, aiming at seizing the artillery and ammunition depot on top of Ladder Hill. Governor Corneille pacified them for a time; but the mutiny soon broke out again with the officers and a body of loyal men fighting it out with the rest of the Company's soldiers. They started with muskets and ended with both sides using field guns. At last the mutineers surrendered. Many of them escaped in the darkness, mixed with the loyal troops and pretended they had played no part in the mutiny. All the known mutineers were tried by court-martial, and ninety-nine were condemned to death. Even in those days the authorities were reluctant to carry out a mass slaughter, so the men drew lots and one in ten was shot.

For stealing a piece of cloth from a sailor in the street, one William Whaley was hanged. Not many years later (in 1800) a slave was hanged for snatching a bottle of liquor from a drunken soldier. These crimes were regarded as highway robbery.

St. Helena's most prominent landmark is the great ridge on the north-east coast known as the Barn. It dominates the Longwood plain, and Napoleon must have hated the sight of it; though nowadays some people see an outline of Napoleon on his death bed along the edge of the Barn. Wild goats, descended from the goats left by the Portuguese, have lived in the inaccessible caves of the Barn for centuries. You have to be a fine climber to follow those goats along the narrow ledges, and if you fall the sea is hundreds of feet below. Nevertheless, these perilous heights once provided a sanctuary for a

raider who is still remembered on the island.

A party of islanders were stalking the wild goats with shot guns and rifles one day in 1897, when there were more goats than you will find now. Two brothers named Legg were there with George Duncan; and they related this queer tale to Mr. Edward Constantine, the history lover, who passed it on to me with meticulous accuracy.

The islanders followed a goat along a dangerous "vein" on the west side, clinging to a precipice which hangs over the sea. Suddenly they came to a cave with an entrance just large enough for a man to squeeze inside. It looked as though the stone "doorway" had been built by human hands. "One man could keep an army out of that cave," Constantine told me. "A push, and an intruder would fall three hundred feet into the sea."

Abandoning the goat hunt, the three islanders climbed into the cave and explored it. They found a bed made of slate and other stones, a pair of blue cloth trousers which fell to pieces when touched, a stone club and a chopper made from the heel of a scythe. A bag contained ten pounds of salt; there was a good razor wrapped in flannel; a whetstone, tinder-box flint and steel; some jerked beef still fit to eat; a bottle of water and a large amount of island tobacco done up in rolls. The cave dweller had made shelves of flat stone slabs. A smaller cave had been used as a kitchen.

This was the lair of an eccentric hermit named Louden's Ben, a deserter from a Portuguese ship. Ben worked on the Longwood farms for some years. Then he went queer in the head, and from time to time he would tell the farmers: "The white goat on the Barn is calling me." He would disappear for weeks at a time. In 1874 he took to raiding the poultry-runs and vegetable patches, and fired on the police when they

tried to arrest him. After that he was never seen again, though signs of his raids on the farms were obvious enough. Some of the boldest climbers on the island searched the Barn, for everyone knew he was there; but no one imagined that a human being could reach the unknown cave on the seaward side of the Barn where Ben lived. The “vein” followed by the goat-hunters must have been enlarged by the passage of the goats when the Leggs and Duncan reached the cave. Few people indeed have visited the place from that day to this, for it is still a most formidable climb. The fate of Louden’s Ben has never been settled, for no skeleton was found; but he must have fallen into the sea far below his cave. A rock at the foot of the precipice is known to the fishermen as Louden Ben’s Rock.

I have said that St. Helena has known only one murder in more than a century. There was a public execution in 1850 (before Homagee’s arrival) when a half-caste named Lowry, a slave descendant, murdered a servant girl at Fox’s Folly, near Napoleon’s tomb.

St. Helena islanders are among the mildest and most law abiding of people. Thus the island was deeply shocked in 1881 when the news arrived that a St. Helenan named Lefroy had been found guilty of a revolting murder in a railway compartment on the Brighton train. He had shot and knifed an elderly man and robbed him of money and a gold watch and chain. Lefroy hid in a Stepney boarding-house, but his landlady identified him by a portrait in a newspaper. That was the first occasion on which a murderer was caught and hanged as a result of that particular form of publicity.

St. Helena itself remained undisturbed by murder throughout the second half of last century, but there was a sinister incident in 1888 which might easily have ended in murder. This was the arrival of Deeming,

a fugitive who was “wanted” for the murder of eight women and several children.

Deeming spent some weeks on St. Helena in the hope of dodging the police. There was no cable to the island at that time, and no one suspected that he was a murderer. He applied to the firm of Solomon for a position as clerk, but – happily for the island – he was turned down and left soon afterwards. No doubt his murderous instincts would have come to the surface again. Deeming accosted and frightened a number of island girls during his stay, but went no further.

A fugitive of a different sort, but also equipped with an alias, was living quietly on St. Helena at this time and for long afterwards. He was a Fenian conspirator from Ireland named Robert Farrell, who had turned Queen’s evidence in a murder trial and had been sent abroad by the British authorities. Another informer, James Carey, had been followed out of the country and shot dead on board ship in South African waters by a Fenian who had sworn revenge. With this episode in mind, the British Government decided that St. Helena would be a safe place for Farrell. And so it was. He spent many years there, and was killed by an accidental fall of rock at Rupert’s Bay.

So little crime occurred during Governor Sterndale’s period of office (1897-1902) that he was presented with white gloves at all but two of the fourteen criminal sessions over which he presided. Not long afterwards the long, bloodless period was broken. It was late in October 1904 that a young signalman named Robert Gunnell bought a gold chain and pendant in Mrs. George’s shop in Jamestown. He told Mrs. George that this jewellery was a present for his girl, and that he hoped she would marry him. Gunnell went back happily to Prosperous Bay signal station, for he had been accepted.

On the first of November a police constable at Longwood heard the report of a gun in the distance, and thought someone was shooting rabbits. Next day, however, there was no response to a telephone call to the Prosperous Bay signal station. When the police arrived, poor Gunnell was lying dead with a shotgun wound in the back of his head.

Suspicion fell immediately on two brothers, Richard and Lewis Crowie, idle fellows who had already been convicted of several robberies. The Crowies were arrested and taken to the home of Constable Constantine at Longwood. While they were there, Constantine's little daughter saw Lewis Crowie throw a gold watch into the hedge. It was Gunnell's watch.

Soon afterwards the Crowies signed a confession. They had stolen a shotgun and cartridges from Mr. Bassett Legg in Jamestown, and then walked to the signal station and told Gunnell that they had been fishing. Gunnell lived alone. He invited the Crowies to tea, and they were about to sit down when one of the Crowies shouted: "There's a ship out there." Gunnell went to fetch his telescope, and while his back was turned one of the brothers shot him from behind.

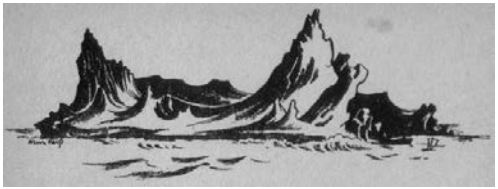
Lt.-Col. Sir Henry Galway, Governor and Chief justice, presided at the trial. The jury returned with a unanimous verdict of guilty, and sentence of death was passed. Galway then set about finding a hangman. He thought it would be a difficult task, for there was no official executioner on the island. Among the troops on St. Helena was a company of Lancashire Fusiliers. They were paraded at the Governor's request, and their captain asked for two volunteers to act as hangmen, each man to receive five pounds. "Volunteers – one pace forward ... march!" yelled the sergeant major. Ninety men stepped forward. Two were selected.

Next day, however, Corporal Shoesmith of the police and John Williams, government carpenter, called on Sir Henry Galway and pointed out how unfair it would be to allow so much money to go to outsiders. They were both old soldiers, and they claimed that they should have been given first refusal of the job.

Galway gave them the job. The carpenter built the gallows in the old wood store next to the gaol at the foot of Jacob's Ladder. The Crowie brothers were executed on February 2, 1905. "It taught me that every man has his price," commented Sir Henry Galway. "I must say that those two amateurs performed their duty like old hands."

That was St. Helena's last murder, and I think the rest of this century will pass without another call for volunteers. During my month on the island, in December 1954, the skeleton of a European woman aged about thirty was found embedded in sand at Sandy Bay. The teeth were perfect, without fillings. There was no possible means of identification, but rumours that the woman had been murdered ran round the island. Some said it was the skeleton of the actress, Eileen "Gay" Gibson, murdered at sea by the steward Camb and pushed through the porthole. Superintendent Ogborn of the St. Helena Police decided against the murder theory. This was probably a victim of an enemy submarine in World War II, washed up and buried in sand, and uncovered more than a decade later by the restless sea.

If you settle on St. Helena you can rule out all crimes of violence and sleep with your doors and windows unlocked. Burglaries are rare, and when they do occur it is usually found that the hungry burglar has left the valuables untouched and spent all his time in the pantry.



Chapter 23
SOME FOUND HAPPINESS

DRIVE OUT of Jamestown by the steep Side Path road, and after a mile you may look down on one of those fine country estates for which St. Helena is famous. This is "The Briars". At a glance you can understand why Napoleon felt so strongly drawn to the place as he rode past during his first day of exile on the island.

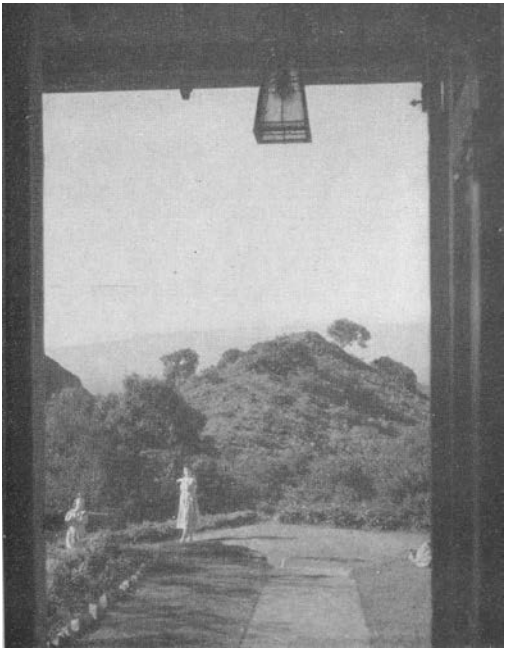
"The Briars" was a yam plantation and government farm in the seventeenth century. When the Emperor noticed it, the place was privately owned and shaded by a variety of beautiful trees. Among the great laurels and palms stood a quaint little pavilion. Napoleon rode up the drive and asked whether he could move into the pavilion immediately.

William Balcombe, owner of "The Briars" was a fat, wealthy man who lived well. According to island legend, he was an illegitimate son of the Prince Regent of England. He was a banker, ship's chandler, and East India Company's financial agent. Balcombe and his wife entertained generously, and gave dances in the pavilion, of oriental design, which had caught Napoleon's eye. They offered Napoleon their own house, but he did not wish to disturb them. So that day Napoleon occupied the dancing pavilion, a single room with two doors and six windows, while his servants pitched tents and his chef prepared dinner in an arbour.

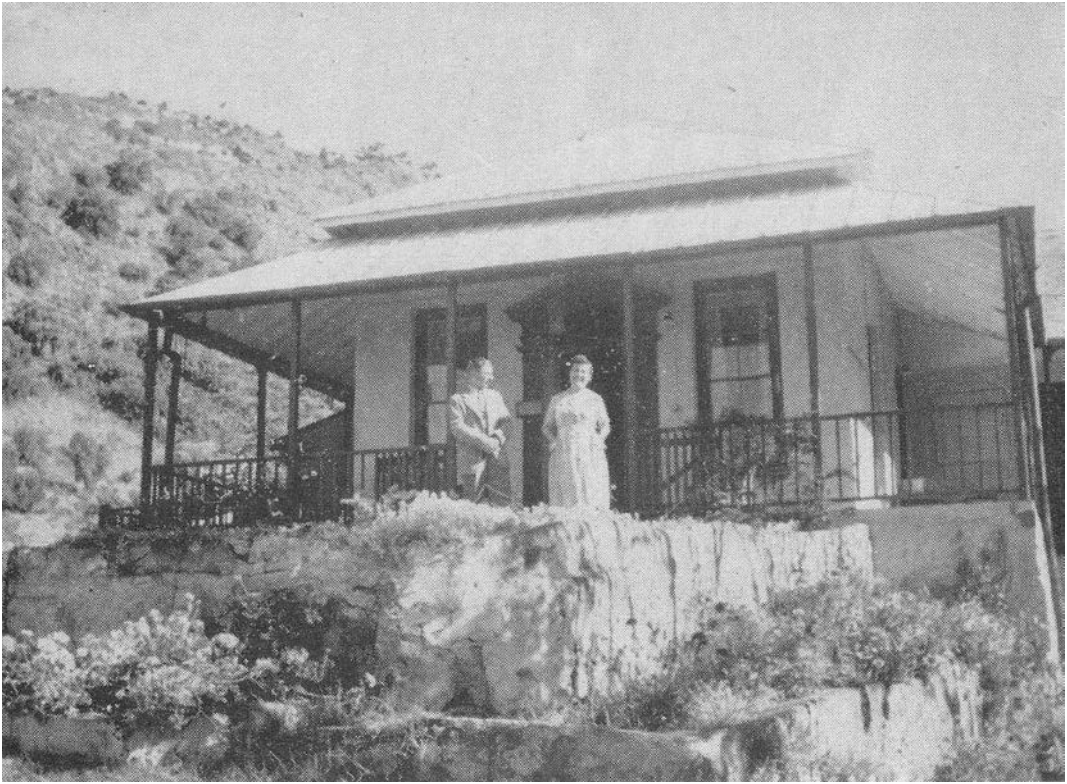
In recent years the pavilion has become a complete house, the home of the cable station manager. It is still a charming place. I found the view and the climate pleasing; for "The Briars" stands above the heat of the valley yet below the mists

which some find depressing. Much of the original design and ornate decoration remain unaltered. I copied the plaque beside the front door: “The Duke of Wellington stayed in this house when he returned from India in July 1805. The Emperor Napoleon also lived here from the 18th of October until the 10th of December 1815, before taking up his residence at Longwood House.”

Those were Napoleon’s happiest weeks on St. Helena, I imagine. He formed his friendship with mischievous, precocious, fourteen year-old Betsy Balcombe, with her blue eyes and blonde curls. She stole his papers, accused him of eating frogs, swung a sabre dangerously round his head, denounced him for cheating at cards and slapped the face of the courtier Las Cases. The bungalow where the Balcombes lived is in ruins, but I peered into the cellar where Betsy was locked up all night as a punishment. She spent the



It is still a charming place. I found the climate pleasing.



Among the great laurels and palms stood a quaint little pavilion. Napoleon rode up the drive and asked whether he could move into the pavilion immediatley.

dark hours terror-stricken, throwing her father's wine bottles at the rats.

What a place to live, amid such memories! I wandered in the old garden where the wild dog-roses called briars grow to this day; and I pictured Napoleon talking to the slave gardener Toby, the man whose freedom he tried to buy. In Balcombe's time this estate produced many of the fruits of Europe and Africa; and after Balcombe had fed his own large household, the surplus fetched six hundred pounds a year. Balcombe had a brewery there, too. Yet in spite of these profitable enterprises, Balcombe ran into debt and finally, sold the lovely place to Isaac Moss, partner and close relative of the first Saul Solomon.

"The Briars" became a silk worm farm in 1828, a man named Walker having paid nine thousand pounds for it. Mulberry groves were planted. A Chinese labourer was sent all the way to China, returning with the silk worms. However, the venture failed. Saul Solomon bought "The Briars" for four hundred pounds; later the Moss family regained possession of "The Briars" and lived there for decades last century. Miss Phoebe Moss was responsible for importing and releasing the mynah birds which are now too plentiful, and too fond of fruit. She also introduced South African frogs, but these appear to be harmless.

Early this century the Eastern Telegraph Company bought "The Briars" and moved up from the house at Rupert's Bay where the cable was landed. Cable companies used to send pre-fabricated buildings of uniform design to their outposts; and these bungalows now stand among the banyans and bananas. For many years, cables were sent by hand and besides the executives there were forty operators, all bachelors, living at "The Briars". The old estate became the social centre of the island. Many servants were employed. The forty bachelors had forty ponies, a bowling

green, a library with thousands of books, and a mess where guests were entertained magnificently. Some of the servants built cottages round the estate, so that people talked of “The Briars village”. It is hardly a village, though it is the only group of houses outside Jamestown on the island which might possibly rank as a hamlet.

Not far from “The Briars” is Chubb’s Spring, where Napoleon sometimes walked. Captain Bennet of the infantry had a house at the spring in those days; and when Napoleon died, Bennet gave his handsome dining-room table so that the carpenter could make a coffin.

On the road just above “The Briars” is Button-up Corner. The change of climate is so sudden that the riders of old buttoned their greatcoats. Near here a path runs to a cottage where the island’s lepers are segregated; just two or three afflicted people living amid great beauty. Still climbing, you come to Alarm House, where two guns were placed towards the end of the seventeenth century to fire a signal when ships were sighted. Here, too, is Alarm Cottage, which can be hired by visitors complete with a skilled St. Helena cook, and at such a reasonable rate that you seem to have stepped back into the past. On the farm outside you can study the island produce growing abundantly. No house on St. Helena nowadays fetches as much as it cost to build. Alarm Cottage, with several acres of good agricultural land, changed hands at five hundred pounds when last it was sold.

Now the road skirts the great hollow called the Devil’s Punchbowl and the empty, nameless tomb where Napoleon’s body lay from 1821 to 1840. I believe that he only visited the site of his grave once in his life, and drank from a spring. You find a cottage and a caretaker at this spot; once the tomb was guarded by a French army sergeant, but now a St. Helenan tends this little patch of France within the iron railings. The caretaker comes out

with glasses on a tray so that visitors may drink from Napoleon's spring.

Perhaps you remember the incident when Napoleon's funeral ended and his French followers broke off a few branches from the willow over the grave before returning to Longwood. That willow died soon after World War II, but cuttings were known to have been taken to Australia. Slips from the Australian offshoots were nurtured, on instructions from General Smuts, by the forestry department near Stellenbosch; and they were planted at the tomb on the one hundred and twenty-eighth anniversary of Napoleon's death.

The road to Longwood leads past Halley's Mount, where the seventeenth century comet discoverer set up his telescope to observe a transit of Mercury, but failed owing to mist. It goes on past Hutt's Gate, though there was never a man named Hutt; the huts of the slaves stood there.

Longwood and the neighbouring Deadwood once formed one property known as the Great Wood. Old plans show this large, deep forest. Melliss, writing in 1875, declared there were people still living in St. Helena who remembered losing their way in the Longwood gum forests. The area had become a grassy plain with hardly a tree. "I searched in vain for forest trees and shrubs that flourished in tens of thousands not a century ago," wrote Melliss. "Probably one hundred St. Helena plants have thus disappeared since the first introduction of goats on the island. Every one of these was a link in the chain of created beings, which contained within itself evidence of the affinities of other species, both living and extinct, but which evidence is now irrecoverably lost." Today it is hard to believe that people vanished in the forests described by Melliss, and were never seen again.

Goats cannot destroy full-grown forests. What happened was that the old trees died and the goats destroyed the saplings. Governor Beatson imported many exotics early last century; English broom and brambles, Scotch pines and gorse, bushes from the Cape. These new growths overran the island and extinguished much of the indigenous flora. Beatson also destroyed most of the goats, but he was too late.

Deadwood Plain, of course, was covered with the tents of Boer prisoners of war, mainly Transvaalers, in the first years of this century. Old people in St. Helena still speak well of the prisoners. They had the sympathy of the islanders, and it was considered a huge joke when they succeeded in eluding their guards and reaching the taverns of Jamestown unobserved. One man, an Englishman by birth who had fought for the Boers, married an island girl and opened a bakery. “Boer” Smith, as he is called, was still living in retirement on the island while I was there. Indeed, he had only left the island once, to see his mother.

Such a wealth of history, so much literature has grown up round Longwood that I had intended to skirt Longwood Old House with no more than a passing mention. The Napoleonic legend has overshadowed an island which has seen many dramatic episodes apart from the Captivity period. However, I spent a morning at Longwood and became hypnotised, as so many other writers have done before me.

I saw Longwood almost as Napoleon left it. You may remember that the old farmhouse reverted to its original purpose after Napoleon’s death. For some years the farm was owned and worked by a member of the Moss family. The rooms, sacred to all who respect the relics of history, became storerooms and stables; even the salon where Napoleon died. Souvenir hunters looted the place and

scribbled their names on the walls. Even the wallpaper was torn off by visitors. Rats took up their abode in ceilings and floors.

France gained possession of Longwood a century ago, and some restoration was carried out. Longwood has known many vicissitudes, but in recent years no money has been spared in preserving the historic farmhouse. Furniture and other articles used by Napoleon have been sent back to Longwood, some from France, others from different parts of St. Helena. I saw the globes of the earth and the sky, bearing the marks of Napoleon's finger-nails. There were the sideboards used by the priest Vignali when he celebrated Mass. The original copper bath, where Napoleon lay dictating his memoirs, was back in its place. And I rolled a ball by hand over the billiard table, following Napoleon's custom.

I walked in the garden, too, along those deep paths which Napoleon followed because the hated sentries could not see him. Pending under the wind was a tree of the cypress species, and an evergreen oak, which were there in Napoleon's day. I thought of the years of wind and rain which the French exiles endured at Longwood. (The island golf club is at Longwood, but few people who know the island would care to live in such an exposed spot.) Napoleon needed the garden walls and the pergola with the passion vine.

Longwood must have been an uncomfortable place in Napoleon's day. I went up the stairs and walked under the slate roof, and I was surprised to hear that the servants lived in those crowded garrets over the rooms of Napoleon's staff. At one period there were more than fifty people, masters and servants, herded in this farmhouse.

In the yard I noticed a small out-building attached to a wall and inquired innocently: "Was that Napoleon's lavatory?" My

guide replied with dignity: “The Emperor used only a commode.”

Labourers digging in the garden while I was at Longwood brought to the surface scraps and fragments which called the Captivity to my eyes more vividly than any of the museum pieces. They found buttons of the St. Helena Regiment, coins bearing the names of Solomon, Dickson and Taylor, and the very broken glass of the wine bottles which caused so much trouble with the Governor, Sir Hudson Lowe. Perhaps you did not realise that even Napoleon was supposed to return his empty bottles. They disposed of a thousand bottles of wine a month at Longwood. I will not say they drank so much, for there is evidence that Napoleon’s servants sold wine to the soldiers of the guard. Sir Hudson Lowe was appalled by the cost, and asked for the return of the empties. To show their contempt, Napoleon’s servants broke many bottles deliberately. Lowe was extremely angry when he found the shattered glass in the garden, and threatened to cut off the Emperor’s wine. So the gardeners still unearth these relics. The pieces they showed me were fragments of champagne bottles, with thick green glass.

Across the valley from Longwood stands a country-house now called Teutonic Hall, but once the residence of the Miss Polly Mason who was said to have signalled to Napoleon. She was an eccentric old maid who rode about the island on an ox. Napoleon liked visiting her; but there was never a love affair with her or anyone else to lighten Napoleon’s exile. Napoleon’s servants, however, left children on the island. His valet, Marchand, had two children by an island girl named Esther Vesey, and was rebuked for it. All the servants were more or less free to roam Jamestown, thus adding a very small French strain to the island mixture.

Thousands who call at St. Helena, spending part of a day before their ship moves on, carry away nothing more than a few impressions of Jamestown and the drive of five miles to Longwood. This is better than nothing, but there is time for more. St. Helena is an island of quaint and beautiful names and memorable places. Anyone who fails to gaze upon the Sandy Bay scene misses one of the seven wonders of the seas. This district is part of a great volcanic crater; a basin composed of naked black mountains, fantastic peaks, volcanic vents, ridges and ravines, varied by the rich green botanical wonders of the island summit.

I looked out over this staggering panorama from Rose Cottage, home of the Lunns, who were previously in Uganda. They bought Rose Cottage and an acre of garden for seven hundred pounds a few years ago. Pheasants are a nuisance in the garden, but they have fowls and ducks, rabbits and sheep. A very old Seville orange tree probably came from Spain or Portugal. Plum trees yield enormous crops.

Mr. Lunn pointed out the Sandy Bay landmarks. Most prominent of all is the spiral rock called Lot, rising nearly three hundred feet above the hill on which it stands. It has been climbed, but only at great risk. Mutinous slaves once took refuge in a cave at the foot of Lot. They held out for days, rolling stones down on their attackers. According to the records, “a brisk young man named Worrall” climbed Lot behind and above the slaves. “Then they hove down rocks in their turn and beat down the chief of the slaves so much bruised that he died, at which all the people in Sandy Bay had great satisfaction, for they had suffered much from them.”

Beyond the Lot rock are Lot’s Wife and the Asses’ Ears. Here, too, in the volcanic upheaval are the Devil’s Garden and the Gates of Chaos. I saw the black face of

Cole's Rock, where the slave-owner Cole was just about to flog one of his men when all the other slaves turned on him and threw him over the cliff.

Jenkins, the man whose ear caused so much trouble when it was cut off by the Spaniards – the War of Jenkins' Ear, you remember – once lived in this crater. He was governor of the island in 1741, and his old house Lemon Grove has a plaque in the wall. Some of the East India Company's gardens were in this huge bowl, irrigated by the best stream in the island. Date palms are old and enormous, and there are many pomegranates. Virgin Hall, a very old estate, still produces fine vegetables and bananas of the best flavour. Rats feed on wild olives. The Sandy Bay beach, where a party of Boer War prisoners seized a boat and tried to escape, has been washed away. Fishing boats no longer use it, and there are times when even a turtle would find landing dangerous. Barracks and cannon of the old fort on the shore have fallen into the sea.

Grandest of the residences above Sandy Bay is Mount Pleasant, visited more than once by Napoleon. The owner at that time was Mr. (later Sir) William Doveton, born and brought up on the island, and possessed of a simple island outlook. Napoleon brought his own food from Longwood, and Doveton thought it was indeed a sumptuous breakfast – champagne, cold pie, potted meat, cold turkey, curried fowl, ham, dates, almonds, oranges, salad and coffee. Cason's is another high estate, named after an officer who commanded the troops under seven governors. Bamboo Hedge is a flax mill nowadays. Blarney House, Blarney bridge, and the old dairy farm called Fairyland are also in this neighbourhood.

You will have gathered that St. Helena is an island of quaint and beautiful names. Dolly's Chop House has vanished, but Distant Cottage is still there; far in the

south of the island beyond Lot's Wife Wood. West Lodge has a ghost legend. A slave was flogged to death there, and a slave orchestra played to drown his cries. They say you can still hear that music. Someone played a practical joke there on a soldier of the St. Helena garrison during World War II. The victim had to have mental treatment.

Mount Eternity, Rosemary Hall, Myrtle Grove, Wild Ram Spring, Spyglass, Blue Point, Willow Cottage, Chinaman's, Rock Rose, Lazy Point, Silver Hill ... my large-scale St. Helena map is worth the five shillings I paid for it at the Castle. The names remind me of many a ramble, and many an eyrie where I stood and dreamt of all the pages of this dramatic island's story. Such a place was the High Knoll fortress. I found the massive doors wide open and the whole place deserted, from dungeons to powder magazines; deserted except by the wild goats that seemed to accentuate the weird atmosphere. I thought of the old mutineers who were blindfolded and shot against the grey walls last century. I remembered that Boer prisoners who tried to escape were locked in this fortress. And I felt glad that I could walk out without a sentry to stop me, and find my car and drive away.

Knollcombes is a happier memory. Sir George Bingham once lived there; the man who saw a fourteen-year-old slave girl with her back bleeding after a whipping, and thereupon started the movement which led to the abolition of slavery on the island. But the house Bingham occupied was in ruins, thanks to the white ant which has eaten so many St. Helena homes. I discovered fragments of a spinet, the piano of the eighteenth century, lying among the remnants of furniture. Knollcombes is now the property of the retired army officer you met playing cricket in the yard of the hotel. He was planning a new house on the old place. I walked round the garden

with him, and saw that he would have peaches and guavas on his table, and pine logs to burn, and pheasant in season. St. Helena is a long way out of the world, but those who do not fear solitude will find peace there.

Just above Knollcombes is the Baptist chapel, and the graveyard where Boer prisoners who died on the island were buried. Two of them were boys of sixteen, two were men over seventy. All the names are inscribed on the two memorial pillars. The graveyard is always neat. In a neighbouring cemetery there is an impressive obelisk in memory of Governor Hudson Ralph Janisch, who was also an historian and an astronomer. Only one previous official born in St. Helena had become governor. Janisch was the eldest son of G. W. Janisch, confidential clerk to Sir Hudson Lowe during the Captivity. He never left the island, but became a magistrate and then served various governors so well that he was recommended for the highest position himself. When he was appointed, however, the governor's salary was reduced from £2000 a year to £900. Hudson Janisch had the confidence of the islanders, and governed them well from 1873 to 1884, a hard period in the island's history, when more than fifteen hundred St. Helenans emigrated to the Cape. Janisch was the first official to recognise the value of the archives in the Castle at Jamestown. He indexed the records and found many episodes for his "Extracts from the St. Helena Records". His descendants left the island and settled in Cape Town, but some of them still visit the island where the first two Janischs helped to make history.

Four generations of Janischs have ridden on the tortoise which is pointed out to every visitor in the grounds of Plantation House, the governor's residence. Visitors are informed that this tortoise (probably from Mauritius) is a living link with



Just above Knollcombes is the Baptist chapel and the graveyard where Boer prisoners were buried. Two of them were boys of sixteen, two were men over seventy.

Napoleon. In fact, it was landed as recently as 1858, when there were already two giant tortoises of the same species chewing the governor's lawn. One died in 1877, and the shell was sent to the London Natural History museum. There was an aged female which the millionaire Rothschild tried to buy, but his offer was refused. This tortoise was accidentally killed by falling over a cliff. The survivor is a male, but its exact age is unknown.

Plantation House, with its farm of more than a hundred acres, is one of the island's oldest and most pleasant estates. The house was built in 1792, but Sir Hudson Lowe added the present library, billiard room and other amenities. St. Helena is the starting point in a colonial governor's career. There must have been many past governors who rose to much greater positions, but who looked back wistfully on their years in charming little Plantation House.

Doubtless the heyday of Plantation House was the Captivity period, for Sir Hudson Lowe's salary was £12,000 a year. Lowe had two large farms producing free of charge the food which enabled him to entertain generously. The company's slaves worked as labourers, and there were many skilled Chinese on the estate. But I do not think Lowe ever enjoyed himself. He was too worried, too full of fear that Napoleon would escape, too conscious of his responsibilities.

Rooms at Plantation House have old brass plates with the positions of those who occupied them many years ago: Governor's Room, Admiral's Room, General's Room, Baron's Room. One room is labelled "Chaos", and here a poltergeist is said to disturb the fine old furniture occasionally. I must say that the friendly and homely atmosphere of Plantation House did not suggest a haunted mansion to me.

One memorable Sunday, thanks to Inspector Ogborn of the police, I circumnavigated St. Helena in the motor-launch Yellowfin. Several islanders among the inspector's guests confessed that it was the first time they had cruised all the way round their lonely island. We towed a gig as a lifeboat; for it might mean shipwreck if the engine failed on the uninhabited, wave-lashed stretches of the island's weather side.

At first the coastline was familiar, for I had been out fishing with Charlie Wade as far as Egg Island. There were the goat-tracks across the seaward face of Ladder Hill, often used by daring islanders following stray goats, or gathering wild pepper and wild tobacco on the cliffs, or hunting wild rabbits in the caves. I still shudder when I think of the precipices surrounding that island. Many islanders have gone out, never to return; though all knew that they had either fallen to their deaths or been swept off the rocks. Charlie Wade told me about three brothers who had all vanished at different times. "Must have bin a drowning family," remarked Charlie calmly.

Every valley has its ruins. Steering west about from Jamestown, you come first to Breakneck Valley, barred by a Dutch wall. Young's Valley was defended in the same way, but the name is fairly recent. It seems that Young had a garden with yams and bananas in the narrow valley, and lived there happily until his wife fell ill. The doctor advised him to move, for the valley is isolated. Then his wife died.

"Same man Young what was dwelling here drowned hisself two years afterwards," Charlie Wade ended. "He was a bit daft, see ... jumped over."

My favourite St. Helena valley, the place I would select for a retreat from civilisation, is Lemon Valley. More than two centuries ago a Dutch squadron from Table Bay landed soldiers there, but the



One memorable Sunday I circumnavigated St. Helena in the motor-launch Yellowfin.

English threw large stones over the cliff and beat them off. Never-theless, the Dutch captured the island and built a dizzy fort on the cliff overlooking the Lemon Valley landing place; and they threw the usual defensive wall across the mouth of the valley.

Lemon Valley was once the watering place of the East India ships. Then a landslide occurred, and the taste and colour of the water were affected. However, there is a stream which never dries up, and though the lemons have vanished there are still a few guava and banana trees. A solid stone house, used as quarantine station and barracks for the garrison in World War II, now lacks doors, windows and floors. As I roamed the deserted valley I felt that a hermit who was also a handyman could soon put things in order, grow enough fruit and vegetables and catch enough fish to support himself.

This time the Yellowfin slipped past my imaginary paradise. I saw the bird rocks again, where the black crabs come out into the sunshine. There was Creepy Cove, so called because it is impossible to climb along the cliffs unless you creep on all fours. Then came Horse Pasture Point, with the sea booming in the caves at water level; noddies nesting in a guano cave.

Egg Island is a huge white waterless rock where the Dutch set up cannon and left a few unhappy soldiers to repel invaders. At rare intervals the tide will allow you to walk from the island to the mainland. Police sergeant Dillon told me that he explored Egg Island with Dr. Gosse, the historian, some years ago and found some cannon balls, coins and military buttons. Dillon was in the guano trade before he joined the police. He knows the rotten rock of his native island, and he spent months working desolate Bosun Bird Islet at Ascension. (“We had to dig our own ‘graves’ in the guano to sleep on Bosun

Bird – and the lice nearly ate us up," Dillon recalled.) Dillon said there was guano on the cliffs at Frying Pan Cove, inside Egg Island, but it was a dangerous place for a boat. The usual system was for a man to be lowered over the cliff in a bo'sun's chair with a bag between his legs. This man chopped the solid guano off the cliff with a hammer, filled the bag, and then sent the bag down to a boat. If there was an overhang, the man in the chair drove pegs into the cliff, then made the chair fast to dead-eyes on the pegs and hauled himself below the bulge. It was a pretty desperate game, he declared, and only a few men on St. Helena had the nerve to do it. With guano at £15 a ton it was more or less worth the risk. Frying Pan Cove was a nightmare, however, because you had to work without the aid of a boat. Moreover, the men who lowered the chair could not see what the man in the chair was doing. The sacks of guano had to be hauled up the cliff when they were full. Special whistle signals were given for each stage in the operation.

Members of the Phillips family are about the only real guano experts left on St. Helena, apart from Dillon. There is old man Phillips working with a son and a son-in-law. Another son worked with the team, but one day they hauled up the chair and there was no one in it. "Maybe a stone struck him," suggested Dillon. "He must have fallen out of the chair and got drowned."

From the Yellowfin I saw the five rocks and islets where the seabirds nest: Egg, Peaked, Speery, George and Shore Island. All are close inshore. Speery is the most dramatic; a pinnacle rock where you would imagine that even the birds would find it hard to move. Yet men climb that rock, work the guano and sleep on the summit.

Most common among the seabirds is the White-capped Noddy, known to the

islanders as the Noddy Bird. Another species of Noddy (called "Blackbird" locally) is vicious, and men collecting guano have to guard their heads. But the most spectacular bird of these waters is the Red-billed Tropic Bird (the "Trophy-bird" of the islanders), which nests in the cliffs. They have a way of dropping off the ledges to launch themselves in the air, and it is said that they cannot rise on the wing from level ground.

Many birds of St. Helena were captured alive or shot for sale to visitors up to about sixty years ago. Tropic Birds were killed for their plumes, which then adorned women's hats. The interesting St. Helena Sandplover, or Wire Bird, was trapped and sold in cages. This land bird is believed to be the only indigenous bird of the island; it was noticed by very early travellers. Fortunately the trade in birds was stopped towards the end of last century, or several species would have been exterminated by now. Major E. L. Haydock, the ornithologist, located only about one hundred pairs of Wire Birds on the island a few years ago.

Dillon told me there must have been rare birds on St. Helena "in the before days". He found a pair of avian feet on Shore Island once, large feet different from the feet of any bird frequenting the island today. These mysterious skeleton feet were buried deep in the guano, and Dillon is still wondering what the whole bird looked like.

"Sea's a bit rugged today," declared the islanders as the Yellowfin plunged into the seas off Sandy Bay, and the spray came over. But as we left the last of the bird islands astern the launch was running before the trade wind, moving easily until she came into the calmer waters of Prosperous Bay. There the party landed, and I looked up to the heights and saw the old, disused signal station where poor Gunnell was so stupidly murdered. Dillon told me a happier story of Prosperous

Bay. He once found a four hundred pound turtle some way inland, where it had gone to lay its eggs; and he sold it at five pence a pound. Here, too, are more ruins – the battery and a fort built to keep any possible friends of Napoleon away from the anchorage.

It was at Prosperous Bay that the English landed in 1673 to recapture the island from the Dutch. Captain Kedgwin took four hundred men on shore, using a clever negro slave named Black Oliver as guide. It was long odds against the assault succeeding, for the whole force had to scale a cliff with a last perilous section which demands a rope. A fine climber named Tom climbed the last section without any sort of aid, and then lowered a rope by which the four hundred men reached Longwood Plain. As each man came up, hand over hand, he called out: "Hold fast, Tom!" (This point on the cliff has been marked as Holdfast Tom on the maps ever since then.) Meanwhile Captain Munden was bombarding Jamestown from the sea. The Dutch surrendered. Prosperous Bay gained its name as a result of the British victory. Someone had to climb down the Holdfast Tom cliff when Napoleon died, for there is a gypsum deposit there and this was used for the controversial death mask. Another account, however, states that the gypsum was fetched hurriedly from George Island by whaleboat.

Sail on round the sinister cliffs of Turk's Cap and the Barn, round Buttermilk Point, past Half Moon Battery and you come to Rupert's Bay. This opens up another secluded, almost forgotten yet lovely valley which seems to be waiting for an escapist.

Rupert was a prince, son of the King of Bohemia, who anchored in the bay to refresh his ship's company a couple of hundred years ago. Ever since then the islanders have called it Rupert's Valley. William Burchell the botanist of South

African fame occupied a house in Rupert's Valley early last century. He landed on St. Helena by accident, became deeply interested in the plants, and stayed on as schoolmaster. For five years he investigated the botany and geology of the island, and he sent many specimens to England. It was due to Burchell's experiments that the island was proved to be a suitable place for coffee and cotton. He sailed for the Cape in 1810, to embark on the expeditions which led to greater achievements.

Freed slaves were housed in Rupert's Valley a century ago. Many thousands of slaves rested there, recovering from the ordeal of the holds, before they were sent on to work as free labourers in the West Indies. Melliss the naturalist boarded a captured slaver just as she anchored in Rupert's Bay in 1861, and gave this impression: "I picked my way from end to end in order to avoid treading upon the slaves. The deck was thickly strewn with the dead, dying and starved bodies. A visit to a fully-freighted slave ship is not easily to be forgotten; a scene so intensified in all that is horrible almost defies description." Bishop Gray was another shocked visitor to Rupert's Bay at that period. "If anything were needed to fill the soul with burning indignation against that masterwork of Satan, the Slave Trade, it would be a visit to this institution," he wrote. "There were not less than six hundred poor souls in it. Of these more than three hundred were in hospital; some affected with dreadful ophthalmia; others with severe rheumatism, others with dysentery, the number of deaths in a week being twenty-one."

It was a slave ship, of course, which brought the white ant to St. Helena. Within thirty years Jamestown had been devastated, and the ant had created havoc all over the island before the end of the century.

“In the shipping days,” as the islanders say, when fifteen hundred ships a year called and it was not so hard for a man to earn a living, Jamestown was overcrowded. One governor of a century ago suggested that a suburb should be built in Rupert’s Valley. This was done, but a scheme for linking the two valleys by a tunnel was never carried out. At that time, too, a governor sent to England for a wooden prefabricated building called a “model gaol”. It was set up in Rupert’s Valley. Not long afterwards a prisoner who disliked all gaols, model or otherwise, put a match to it. Within an hour it had been destroyed. Other buildings of the period are still there, but mainly in ruins. One good double-storeyed house, with a plaque in honour of Burchell and palms and bananas, is used by the cable company; for you can see the deep-sea cable emerging from the ocean and crossing the beach. The whole waterfront is barricaded in the familiar St. Helena fashion by an old fort wall. A chimney and boilers were pointed out to me as relics of the South African War, for they formed a distilling plant to supply the prisoner-of-war camps.

Shortly before World War II a solitary leper was living at Rupert’s Bay, passing the time with a gramophone and a number of old records. He is no longer there, and I imagine that it would not cost much to rent a house in the valley.

I walked along the cliff paths one Sunday afternoon from Jamestown to Rupert’s Bay, and it was a walk to remember. Often I dared not look over the low stone wall. There is an inlet along the route called Rowland’s Cove, scene of several fatal accidents owing to rock falls and people slipping over the edge. St. Helena is an island of incredible residences, and I saw one that afternoon. The house was built into a ledge in the cliff, there was a palm tree apparently growing out of the rock, and you could have dropped a

fishing-line into the sea from any of the front windows. A painter could have made a remarkable canvas of that quaint eyrie, but I was always conscious of the heights.

Well, you have circled St. Helena and the launch Yellowfin is back on her moorings off Jamestown in the bay which has known so much sea adventure. I fancy that I can see the earliest sailors of all landing on the beach, taking what they wished in goats and swine and fruit, carving records of their visits on rocks and trees, and sailing away with their memories of the uninhabited mid-ocean paradise. “Providence has bestowed upon it all that is best of air, earth and water,” declared Francois Pyrard. “Nowhere in the world, I believe, will you find an island of its size to compare with it.”

Some people in St. Helena still hold that opinion, and they are not all islanders. There are others among the white community who regard themselves as exiles; they wish their lives away, looking forward always to the next holiday in England, or the next transfer to some less-isolated colony. What is the truth?

There is no truth for all. I was told of a woman, suffering acutely from a nervous complaint, who went to stay with well-meaning friends on St. Helena; for they thought the utter peace of the island would cure her. Instead, it brought on the most serious emotional attack she had ever known. The ship left, and she felt trapped. It was claustrophobia in a dangerous form. Heaven alone knows what would have happened to her if a ship had not put in by sheer chance a few days later and carried her thankfully away.

Another woman who was merely bored after a year or two on the island remarked to me: “I prefer bridge to conversation here. You go round and round meeting the same people and hearing the same subjects discussed time after time. It’s like going on for years in the same ship with

the same passengers. A man has his work; but a woman is to be pitied."

Then there was the wife of a well-educated, well-travelled man who had nevertheless spent most of his life on the island. She had been born elsewhere. "I am afraid that I am here for life, and I feel it," she summed up. "I dare not make close friends, for in a few years they pass on to a tour of duty elsewhere and are lost to me. In any case it is hard to make friends – the circle is too narrow."

Yet I remember, too, a man who seemed happy – a settler who had tried other paradise islands and left them in disgust, and found peace on St. Helena. The war had been unkind to him, I know, and he deserved to find what he had been seeking. "I don't see why I should be called an escapist simply because I have chosen to live in a place where the people do not hate one another," he declared.

I cannot quarrel with that test, but there is another which I would have to apply successfully to find the island of my dreams. It is pleasant to see well-nourished people round one. You can enjoy your own meals far more if the general standard of living is not so very far below your own. Now as I have said, the St. Helena people are not starving. Certainly they are not well-fed. I gave a small boy a shilling for carrying my fish up from the wharf, and asked him what he would do with the money. He looked up at me in surprise. "Give it to my mother to buy bread," he replied. "Lots o' people here werry poor, mister."

Just before I sailed from St. Helena I was taken to see a woman of ninety-seven. Her father and mother had been slaves. She had married at twenty-one, and her marriage had lasted for seventy-one years: Her tiny cottage looked out over a wide expanse of ocean, but she was almost blind. I expressed my sympathy,

wondering what the secret of her peaceful mind might be.

“Oh, it’s not so bad, “ smiled the old woman. “I’ve had a contented life, my daughter looks after me – and I can still see the sunset.”

THE END

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